Why does mankind exist?

A question that has been a most frustrating topic among members of the human race since its beginning long long ago, and every man, woman and child has had their own unique answer. To the religious, they thought God had created mankind in His image. To the scientific, humanity is naturally superior in the ongoing race of evolution and survival. To the average everyday individual, the human exists for no other reason except just because.

Humans are truly an interesting creature. Thousands of years ago, we figured out how to make wonders of art, and how to hurt another with a weapon. Thousands of years later from now, we'll have mastered interstellar travel, and will have extended our existence across the stars, maybe even beyond. And yet, we have a lot of flaws in spite of our apparent brilliance.

For many centuries, we've prayed to an invisible deity, we've hated and raged

against each other for reasons big and small, we've expressed absolute happiness and sorrow. We cowered in irrational fear and every action we've ever made spawned from some kind of innate desire within all of us.

Yet, in spite all of this, we still exist.

We're still human.

But then comes another question, one that's also a frustrating topic among humans: Are we alone?

Is there life outside this world of ours? If so, what are *they* like? How do *they* live? More importantly...What do *they* think of us?

Maybe they have their own unique reason on why we exist. Maybe they want to educate and guide us to a bright future, maybe they want to destroy us, see us as a threat. Or maybe they don't care much for us, see us like insects, and thus don't pay us any mind.

Or maybe someone *wants* us.

Maybe there's someone, or something out there right now looking at us, desiring us, like a child would at a toy store.

Maybe they think the reason we exist was so they could own us.

This is a story of such forces existing outside our world. A nameless darkness, a faceless evil, that hungers for humanity. As you read the first chapter of this saga, you'll be taken into a world of paranoia, mystery, and madness as you follow the adventures of a single young man, who inavertently thrusts himself into something unexplainable, and discovers parts of something that utterly defies all reasoning within him, and forces him into a desperate struggle for survival.

This is the first chapter.

Thomas Miller, a young lad just starting out a second year in college. Thomas, or "Tom" for short, was pretty much your average, run of the mill college student. Handsome, dark neck-length hair, always liked wearing a vest over his turtleneck, and of course a kind-hearted intellectual with good grades and only a few friends.

Tom had just returned to his dorm room, where he lived alone, after finishing up his lessons for the day. Just like any other day, Tom's side of his college was a relatively quiet one, just the way he liked it of course. He was never truly one who enjoyed a lot of noise going on around him, and preferred this year of college to be a relaxing one for at least the most part. It was a Friday and the weekend had started, for Tom this was always a perfect opportunity to hang out with his friends. After putting down his backpack and kicking his shoes off, his cellphone buzzed, one of his friends had sent him a text message. Pulling the phone from his pocket, Tom read the message. It was from his pal Roger, who had messaged, "Yo, man, so we still on 2nite?"

Tom texted back, "Oh for sure dude. Been lookin to play some more Smash Bros with you."

After a few minutes, Roger then replied, "Awesome. BTW have u heard from Kyle yet?"

Kyle Scott was Tom's best friend from high school. They had graduated together and now went to the same college. Kyle had always been sort of a reckless type -- more reckless than Tom might've been, anyway -- but Tom always personally thought it was Kyle's way of being adventurous, and had even poked fun of his recklessness time to time.

However, for the past three weeks, Tom had not seen or heard from Kyle. He hadn't even seen him during classes. From time to time, Tom had tried to contact him to see if he was busy or not, and at first, Kyle DID sort of respond to him via text, though it was usually in short replies of one or two words. But eventually, Kyle just stopped responding altogether. Tom had assumed that his friend was just busy with something, but for *three weeks?*

Tom replied, "Not yet. I'm gonna try again in a little bit. If he doesn't respond this time I'll check up on him tomorrow."

After waiting a couple more minutes, Roger replied. "LOL K".

Tom sat down on his couch and looked out the window showing the rest of the college campus, thinking. He thought about what to say when he texted Kyle, wondered if Kyle will finally respond to him. He first considered texting him again, but then changed his mind, deciding to instead try to call him. So he brought up his phone, found Kyle's contact and dialed him. Bringing the cell to his ear, he waited as it was ringing.

No response. Then came Kyle's message, "Hey there! This is Kyle. I'm not here right now, but go on and leave a message!" After that, the beep indicating that you could leave your message.

Tom hesitated, but then spoke, "Hey Kyle, it's me, Tom. Just checking up on you again...For the 57th time probably. Listen man, it's been like, three weeks since we last spoke. Where are you? Anyway, me and a couple of the guys are gonna play some Smash later tonight, and I'd think it'd be cool if you tagged along with us. I really hope you get this. See ya."

He ended the message, put the phone aside and then looked at a framed picture of him and his friend Kyle, back when they graduated and were having fun at the afterparty.

Kyle in the picture was a bit taller than Tom, had shorter, more blond-ish hair and at the time wore a red shirt with black jeans. In the photo, Tom and Kyle smiled at the camera and bro-fisted each other during the party. Tom had always sort of thought of Kyle as a brother, and looking back on that memory kind of made him feel a little sad, not because of the memory itself, but because of Kyle's current absence. Tom resolved to check on his friend if he didn't show up tonight.

After looking at the photo, he turned to look at his shelf which was lined with some of the video games and movies he owned.

Tom loved video games, and was a bit of a Sonic the Hedgehog fan like a lot of other people. He liked the newer games, but also didn't mind the classics. He never played any of the hacked games that sprung up on the internet from time to time, and never saw any real reason to do so.

After looking at his collection, he saw Smash Bros Brawl among them. He got up and pulled the game out, looked at it and then placed it in front of the TV, for when his friends came over. After that he grabbed his laptop, sat back down on the couch, and did a little bit of studying for next week.

Later that evening, Tom's friends Roger and Mike showed up, and just as planned, they started playing Brawl together.

Roger asked, "say, Tom, Kyle's still not showing up, is he?"

Tom sighed. "Yeah, I'm actually starting to worry. I'm gonna go to his place tomorrow to see what's up."

"Good idea," Mike explained, "if he hasn't been responding to yer calls, then he should at least give ya a good reason for it face to face."

"Right..." Tom then picked up the phone to order pizza for him and the guys.

The next day, Tom started walking down the hall to go meet up with Kyle, just as he promised. Kyle's dorm room was a floor below Tom's , so it was normally easy for the two of them to meet up between classes.

With his hand in his pockets, he headed down the stairs and continued down another hall of doors until he reached the door that led into Kyle's dorm room. He knocked on the door, hoping that his friend was in there.

"Kyle?" Tom called out, "You there, dude? It's me, Tom."

Silence. Tom knocked again.

"Kyle? It's been three weeks man, c'mon!" No response. Tom gripped the door knob and tried to turn it. It was locked. He then pressed his ear against the door. Nothing but absolute silence coming from the room.

"....Maybe he's not in there." Tom thought conclusively. "And he couldn't have gone to class. It's Saturday. Fuck's sake, man..." Groaning in frustration, he decided to head back to his own dorm room.

Heading back up the stair and down the hall to his room, Tom stopped and saw something sitting on the floor right at the door to his dorm room.

It was a small package, with a note attached to it.

Tom looked at the package on the floor before picking it up, looking around as if to see if whoever left it was still around. He went into his room looking at the package. The folded note taped to it had his name on it. This package was for him. Taking the note and opening it up, he began to read the letter.

Much to his surprise, it was a letter written by Kyle, or at least, he thought it was from Kyle, he saw the name on the bottom first, but wasn't sure if it was his handwriting. Despite the both of them being friends for years, Tom couldn't for the life of himself remember what Kyle's handwriting looked like. Regardless he continued reading.

It started off pretty normal, a hello, a how are you, a regards to their friends and such. A rather lengthy apology regarding Kyle's absence was also included.

As the letter continued, the writing seemed to grow more jittery, as if Kyle was writing the letter in a hurry. He talked about why he was absent, explaining that he found this great game he bartered from someone online, and has been spending several days playing it. He said it was a video game that nobody had ever seen before, and that he figured he'd share this so-called wonderful game with Tom. He greatly emphasized that Tom should play it just to see how fun of a game it is.

The letter ended abruptly. There was no goodbye, no say hi to their friends, no write back, or thank you. Nothing like that. It was just his name. "Kyle Scott".

Tom scoffed bitterly. "Three weeks of not speaking to me and THIS is your excuse, Kyle?" Tossing the letter aside he unwrapped the package and opened it.

Inside it was a CD-Rom disc still in it's case. There wasn't a cover or a label on what kind of game this disc was supposed to be. The case looked a bit worn out, but the disc itself looked clean, well-polished, no scratches. It looked completely brand new.

It didn't have a side that had a cover describing the game, on both sides it was just that reflective plastic side, except upon closer examination, Tom could faintly see lines faded into both sides. Under the right light, one could see these four thick, slightly dark lines that went from the side of the disc to the center. They were faint, barely noticeable, but Tom saw them. It wasn't like someone drew these lines with a marker, or carved them into the plastic of the disc. If anything, it seemed like the disc was just naturally made with this design. The way they were positioned and came together at the center of the CD before being cut off by the hole made it look like there was an "X" on the CD.

"An 'X'...?" Tom thought. With a scoff, he put the disc down. He was sure Kyle was just pulling some kind of prank on him. Whatever this disc is, it probably didn't even work. Tom felt angry. For three weeks Kyle hadn't spoken to him, and now he wanted him to play this game disc that most likely didn't, *couldn't* even do anything?

"Fuck you, man," Tom said to himself, crumpling the letter up and throwing it away, leaving the disc on the table as he went to go take a shower. Suffice to say, he was at his limit with Kyle now. And why not? Kyle was practically being unreasonable with him, wasn't he? Not speaking to him or anyone else for that matter for weeks, and now this? He couldn't even talk to Tom himself if he really wanted him to play this so-called "great game"? Nope. Tom wasn't gonna play along with this. Not this time.

These thoughts buzzed around in Tom's head as the hot water washed him. Never had he felt so angered or betrayed by his own friend...But that anger started to subside after a while in the water, before being replaced by a new feeling: concern.

The more he thought about it, Tom began to realize the strangeness of it all. He had known Kyle personally for years. For as long as Tom remembered, Kyle was almost never busy for him, and practically hung out with him almost every chance he got. The idea of Kyle being too busy for anything outside his dorm room was starting to sound more ridiculous, let alone being too busy for his friends. More concerning thoughts began to pop up in Tom's head as he continued washing himself: what if something really WAS keeping Kyle busy?

What if he was studying for extra credit? Tom corrected himself as he knew Kyle wasn't exactly the ambitious student, so it couldn't possibly be for that reason.

Maybe Kyle had family problems? While it seemed more likely than extra credit, it

also couldn't be the case, as Kyle never did seem to have a close relationship with his own folks, at least not enough to leave college to help them out.

Maybe he was seeing someone? A date perhaps? Tom never bothered to look into Kyle's personal life but it'd be amazing if Kyle actually DID find love.

Darker thoughts began to appear in Tom's mind the more he thought about it...Did something happen to Kyle?

No, that couldn't be the case. If he was found in a ditch somewhere it could have at least hit the news. Still, the idea that something happened to Kyle lingered in Tom's mind.

He remembered the letter that came with the disc. As he dried himself off, he began to realize how weird it all was. The way it was written seemed...off. It was like Kyle had completely lost his mind as he wrote it, the way it kept going on about "how great the game is" and how jittery the handwriting seemed....

Tom had thought about going around campus to ask if anybody who knew Kyle noticed if he was being strange three weeks prior, but he decided against it as he began to consider the possibility of getting no leads out of it, Kyle wasn't exactly Mr. Popular in college. Hell, he didn't even gain any notoriety in high school.

The next day, Tom sat in his dorm room thinking about what could have happened to Kyle. However, all thoughts about the letter and Kyle's disappearance went by the wayside as Tom heard a knock on the door. Thinking it might've been one of his friends, he walked toward the door and opened it. It wasn't one of his friends.

It was a man. An average-sized, somewhat lanky-looking man somewhere in his late 20s. He had a brown , untidy comb over and a five o' clock shadow, and wore an open suit jacket, white shirt and a green necktie, hands in his pockets, looking a bit distgruntled.

The man looked at Tom and then spoke. "Thomas Miller?"

Tom hesitated and responded. "Most people call me Tom, but yes?"

The man then pulled out what Tom could identify as a detective's badge. "Detective Derek Green, city precinct. Are you friends with one Kyle Scott?"

Tom froze, and his concerns began to resurface. "....Kyle? Uhh, y-yeah. Yeah, I am."

The detective sighed and bit his lip, as if he was trying to find the right way to say something to Tom. "Look, uh...It's probably best if you come with me".

With that, a very confused Tom followed Detective Green down the hall.

"So how long have you known Kyle, Tom?" Green asked.

"Uhh, since high school." Tom replied.

Without even looking at Tom, Green then asked, "and when was the last time you spoke with him?"

Tom was growing more worried and confused. "A-almost three weeks, sir. Umm...listen, what's going on?"

Green pulled out a small book and started writing into it as they continued walking down the hall. As he did so, he continued to speak to Tom. "We had a call not too long ago today about an unsanitary odor going on at Dorm Room #231, Kyle Scott's dorm room. The door was locked from the inside, so somebody had to bust it down just to see what was causing the smell."

As they went down the stairs, Tom asked, rather reluctantly, "and why did you come to me about it?"

Green then spoke a bit more grimly, more hesitantly. "Well...You're his best friend and....It's probably better if you see for yourself."

By the time they reached the corridor that had Kyle's door, Tom could see several police officers, students and a few reporters. "He's with me," Green said to a couple cops as they headed toward Kyle's door. Sure enough, it was busted open. Inside, Tom saw a very unsettling sight.

Kyle's dorm room was a mess. It looked like it hadn't been taken care of in weeks. It was dark, several pieces of furniture had been knocked over, mold was growing in some areas, the food in the fridge was rotting terribly and the overall room just stank something awful. Tom could spot Kyle's computer sitting on his desk, open, turned off and with the screen cracked.

A photographer was taking pictures of the whole scene, and two other people were managing a gurney that had a body laying on it, a white sheet draped completely over the body.

Tom's blood ran cold when he saw the body on the gurney. Green walked him toward it, stopping the two men from carrying it away to show Tom. He stared at the covered body, dreading upon dread on who could be under that sheet.

Green looked at Tom's face, and with unease within himself, flipped the sheet over and revealed the corpse that stared mindlessly back at Tom. The skin was pale white, eyes wide and foggy, the short blond hair on his head unkempt, and his bloodstained mouth agape, as if the jaw bones had been snapped off.

It was Kyle.

2

Shock. That was all Tom had felt as he sat in the quiet interrogation room, alone. Numb with shock.

As he sat in the silence, his mind tried to reel back and remember what had happened more than an hour ago. A detective named Green had visited him, he was brought into Kyle's room, which the cops had to break into and had turned out to be completely derelict for three weeks, and he, Tom, had seen what had become of his friend Kyle. He could still vividly remember the look of horror upon Kyle's face, the jaw hanging uselessly from it's sockets and the eyes wide, dead and empty...

After that, he was brought to the police station by Detective Green, who told him to wait in the interrogation room, promising him he wasn't in any kind of trouble. Tom had been sitting in this dark quiet room, looking at the polished table ever since.

He still couldn't well register what he had seen what felt like minutes ago. How did he not see the signs? How did he not consider the possibility that his own friend had been dead for three weeks? He believed, probably hoped, that Kyle was merely busy, that something kept coming up and he had to cut classes in order to deal with it...But no. Kyle was not busy at all.

He was dead.

Tom snapped out of his increasing depression as he saw the door open. Detective Green walked into the room, carrying a cup of coffee. Following behind him was a dark-haired woman that looked younger than Green, wearing a hot pink vest over her white buttoned shirt and dark blue jeans.

Green gave the coffee to Tom. "Here, you look like you needed a pick-me-up." As Tom took the cup and sipped it, he and the woman sat down with him, Green across from him and the woman beside him. "All right, introductions. Tom, this is my sister Sarah." He paused as Tom shook the woman's hand. "She's part of the investigation I'm working on."

"A pleasure to meet you, Tom," Sarah Green said. Then, with a tone of warm concern, she asked, "are you feeling okay?"

Tom couldn't respond. He felt his face heat up as he looked at his coffee cup.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your friend, Tom," Sarah gave her condolences, putting a hand on Tom's shoulder.

"We both are, honestly," Derek responded. "Now listen, Tom. The reason you're here isn't because you're in trouble. We don't suspect you had anything to do with what's happened to Kyle, so you don't gotta worry. We DO however require your help."

"My help?" Tom said quietly and shakingly, not taking his eyes off the cup, he felt his grief just starting to spill out. "My friend's dead. He's fucking dead, and I..." He felt his eyes welling up, his voice breaking. "I had no idea, nor did I do anything to help him. I should have read the signs the minute he stopped responded to my calls. I should have been there! I should have fucking done something..." He wiped his eyes, sniffling. Sarah handed him a box of tissues, which he took a couple from.

"Now Tom, this isn't your fault," Derek tried to assure him. "I mean, there wasn't really much of anything you or anyone else could have done. You're not at fault here, I promise you. If anyone should be guilty of this, it's whoever killed your friend."

Tom quietly asked, "who would wanna kill Kyle? I mean, I know he was a bit of a reckless prick, I even poked fun at it with him, but he was never one to make enemies."

Derek and Sarah exchanged looks, and then Sarah turned to look at Tom and informed him, "we have evidence to believe that Kyle's death wasn't just some random murder."

Tom looked at her. "What..?"

Derek then pulled out a folder from his coat and handed it to Tom, who quickly took it and opened it to look at its contents as Derek spoke. "Over the last couple of months, numerous bizarre deaths have been happening. Not just in this city, but in neighboring communities as well. They all have been the same thing. Homes left unattended, computers broken in some way, and the bodies..."

Tom felt his insides turn as he saw the photos. All of them, the same way as Kyle. Pale, eyes wide in horror, jaws snapped off, blood staining the inside of their mouths...

Sarah then spoke up. "We checked the autopsies and they all said the same thing, the esophagus and the inside of the chest were completely ruptured, like something large forced it's way down the victims' throats."

Tom shook a bit, unsettled by the sight of so many people being killed in such a gruesome manner. "Who...Who would do this? Who COULD do this???"

"We don't know," Derek replied, "which is why we need your help. We need you to tell us if Kyle said anything before his three-week absence."

"I...I don't..." Tom stopped himself, and tried to think about it. Did Kyle say anything before he disappeared?

He sat there trying to remember, and then it hit him.

The last time Tom saw Kyle three weeks prior was after a weekend party he threw with him and his friends. He had asked Kyle if he wanted to watch a movie with him at his dorm room, but Kyle declined, saying that he wanted to try this new video game he bought online.

"Uhh...I remember asking him if he wanted to see a movie with me after a party, but he said no, and that he wanted to try out some new game he got offa eBay or something. But that was it, really. After that, I haven't seen him for three weeks."

"A new game?" Sarah asked. "What kind of game?"

"I dunno," Tom answered with a shrug. "He never said. I just said okay when he told me and...That was literally the last time I saw him." He sipped his coffee some more.

"Well, it's unlikely a video game could have killed Kyle," Derek shrugged, straightening his coat. "Anyway, you can go now, Tom. You look like you need some rest." As he, Sarah and Tom got outta their chairs Derek handed Tom a piece of paper. "Thank you for your help. Here's my number. If anything happens, call me. Alright?"

Tom took the paper with a nod. "Yes sir." As his hand touched the door, he stopped, then looked at Derek. "Detective Green? What do you make of this?"

"What do I make of this?" Derek parroted back. "Well, I say what happened to your friend and all those people is a horrid thing that should never happen to any human being, even if any of them are criminals."

Derek looked at his sister who looked back at him, and then looked at Tom. "Way I see it, whoever is doing this is pretty much a fucking psychopath."

It had been a week after Kyle's body had been discovered by the police. The college was rather shaken up by the news and the day after they found his body, the staff gave the grievous announcement to the students, and within time rumors were spreading like wildfire regarding what had happened to him.

"I heard he killed himself!" One dark-haired girl said.

"No way, he was murdered!" Came the exclaim of a red-haired boy.

A glasses-wearing lad worringly questioned, "do you think the killer's still out there?"

"I hear they found his body a complete mangled mess!" A jock proclaimed with excitement.

Tom sat miserably in the cafeteria with his friends, Roger, Mike and Mike's girlfriend Vicky, just looking at his food while his friends chattered on.

"Hey," Roger spoke, putting a hand on Tom's shoulder, "you all right, man?"

"Probably dumb of me to ask, but yer still upset about what happened to Kyle?" Mike asked.

Tom merely nodded. "Yeah, yeah I say we all are." Roger replied.

"What do you think happened to him?" Vicky asked.

"Who knows? One thing's certain, whoever killed him still hasn't been caught," Mike said dismissively.

"Ugh, way to make it creepy, jackass." Vicky groaned, folding her arms in disgust.

"Pft, just saying." Mike muttered.

"In any case," Roger spoke up. "We're all here for you, Tom. you know we are."

"Thanks, guys." Tom said, smiling a little bit.

"Tell you one thing, least they're finally getting around to cleaning Kyle's room up," Roger continued as he ate his sandwich.

"About time too." Vicky responded, "Alana lived next door to Kyle and she said she couldn't STAND the smell that kept coming from his room through the vents."

"Do ya think they got rid of his stuff?" Mike asked.

"Either that or gave it to his parents. Though I doubt that computer's gonna be of any use to them," Roger replied.

"Computer..." Tom muttered. The laptop he saw in Kyle's room, he gave it to him as a graduation gift. For some reason, he felt it wouldn't be right for that thing to just get tossed. He stood up from his seat. "I'll be right back, guys."

He ran down the empty halls, hoping the laptop was still in the room. When he reached Kyle's door, he saw that it was open, and there were black plastic bags on the side. Inside, he could see the room had been emptied out and cleaned, and he

saw a short, middle-aged woman wiping the windows. "Hey, uh, excuse me?" He asked walking in.

The lady turned to look at him. "Oh! Hello, dear!" she responded in a kind, Midwestern voice. "What can I do you for?"

"Oh, not much, it's just..." Tom explained. "The guy who lived here was a friend of mine. I gave him this laptop, and I was kinda wondering if I could get it back. Y'know, to honor his memory and such."

"Is that right?" The lady asked. "Well, you're in luck, dear. I put it over there." She pointed to the bed which had be freshly made, sitting on it was Kyle's laptop. "You can go on and have it. Though the screen's cracked and I couldn't turn it on."

Tom looked at the laptop and then picked it up. "Thank you, ma'am." With that he bid her goodbye and left to put the laptop in his room, and headed back to the cafeteria before lessons continued.

Hours later after class, Tom had returned to his room to get a good look at Kyle's laptop. It appeared to be in somewhat decent condition, if a little dusty. The only damage it seemed to have is that it's screen was slightly cracked in a couple places, the cracks were only minor, but Tom wasn't sure if the screen was still functional. Tom looked into the blackness of the cold laptop's screen. It had been turned off, he remembered it had been off since the last time he saw it, in Kyle's room.

Tom leaned in and pressed the power button. No response.

He didn't want to assume that it was broken just yet. Grabbing his charger, he plugged the laptop in and waited. A few minutes of waiting later, a small icon appeared on the black screen, the indication of battery power. Tom let out a sigh of relief; it was still fully functional, it just needed a full recharge. Turning off the cracked screen, he closed the laptop and then texted his friend, Mike. "Hey, Mike, R U and Roger still on for later today?"

Mike responded, "4 sure man. BTW did you get that laptop?"

Tom replied. "Yeah. It's only cracked and it needs a recharge, but other than that it's still in good condition."

"Cool man," Mike texted in return. "Whaddya gonna do with it? Gonna pawn it off or somethin'?"

Tom paused for a moment and pondered that question, but immediately responded with, "nah. It was Kyle's laptop, plus I was the one that gave it to him as a gift. So it wouldn't be right to just get rid of it y'know?"

"LOL I hear ya man. Anyway, gtg. Me and Roger'll cya later."

The weekend came again after that. That Friday night, Tom was alone in his room on his computer studying while Kyle's laptop was still busy charging up. It seemed like it was taking a very long time to get to full power, and there were times Tom had to remove the charger plug in order to keep his own fully charged. Right now Kyle's laptop was at 11% power, not enough to do much on it.

As Tom typed away in his studying, he began to remember when Kyle died. He still felt a nasty pang of guilt every time he looked back on that day. Even though Green had told him that it wasn't his fault, he still believed he should at least have done something to prevent it. He then remembered seeing the photos of all those bodies, all dead in the same way as his friend, his guilt fading into dread over the thought of the culprit responsible for those murders still being out there and not behind bars. He HAD given thought about finding and confronting the bastard that took Kyle's life away, but ultimately he decided to let Green and his sister find the murderer.

A job much easier said than done clearly if they still had no leads, however Tom felt he could trust Detective Green on this. From their last conversation Tom was pretty sure that Green was a good cop.

"He'll catch the creep," Tom said to himself. "Quit your worrying. Green's GONNA catch him." He tried to redirect his thoughts onto the last time he spoke to Kyle; how Kyle had said he found some 'really cool game' that he wanted to try out.

Tom had already concluded that the X-marked CD disc Kyle had sent him was the very same game he had bought before his disappearance, though why he sent it to Tom before his death, Tom couldn't well figure out. The more he thought about it however, the more he began to wonder: what WAS so great about this game Kyle had bought? Was this game really so good that it required Kyle to not attend class for weeks or see his friends or, Tom dared to think, not know he was targeted for murder?

Tom turned to look at the game disc that still sat on his table, the faint X mark on the plastic of the disc shown by the light of the room.

Tom just couldn't stop wondering...

...What was so great about this game?

3

Tom picked up the game disc and looked at it for several minutes as he sat back down in front of his laptop. Since Kyle's laptop was still at 11% power, there was no way Tom could see the game downloaded on it, so he had only his own to rely on.

He opened the CD drive and placed the disc in, closing the drive and waited for the installing notification to show up. After a few minutes, the notification appeared on the screen.

"Do you want to install "Sonic.eXe"?"

"Sonic.exe...?" Tom read the name again to see if it was correct. He felt a small twinge of disbelief creeping up within himself: Really? The "really wonderful, never-before-seen" video game Kyle had found and spent weeks playing before he died was a Sonic the Hedgehog game? Tom felt his anger rising, but he suppressed it. He couldn't bring himself to curse his friend for such stupidity, and who knows? Maybe Tom was being too quick to judge this game. Willing to give the benefit of the doubt in the honor of his friend, Tom clicked yes.

A standard Installation Wizard popped up for "Sonic.exe" and Tom went through the process. He directed the game files to Program Files, checked to add a thumbnail on his Desktop, and of course, agreed to the Terms of Agreement.

The window changed into the progress bar. After several minutes it was at 1%. Realizing it was going to be a while until the game had fully installed, Tom decided to order some takeout and watch a movie. While the game was installing, he went onto Domino's website, made his order, a medium-sized pie with green peppers and bacon and a two-liter of Coke, and then went to his couch and turned on his TV to search for a movie on Netflix. After the delivery man came and Tom got his pizza, he selected The Dark Knight and just enjoyed himself as he waited for the game to install.

As soon as the movie reached the scene where the Joker started to manipulate Two-Face, Tom's computer had suddenly went black -- it had shut down. Tom heard the faint clicking noise that indicated it's shutdown and he turned his head to see the black screen. Pausing the movie, he got up to investigate. It didn't seem to have overheated or anything, so he assumed it was one of those kind of games that required a restart before installation was complete. He waited for the computer to

start back up, and when it didn't Tom grew restless. Surely his computer didn't experience an error or a virus installing this game, did it? After immediately pressing the power button, he let out a sigh of relief when it turned back on after a couple minutes of no response.

He waited for the computer to start back up, signed back in and checked his desktop. There he saw it, sitting at the very center of his desktop was an icon that appeared to be a black "X", there wasn't a name anywhere under it. He right clicked to check on the properties, he was rather surprised to see that there was literally nothing there, no type of file, no description, not even anything describing the location, size or even the dates of when it was created.

Tom stared at the icon, the way it looked on the desktop looks more like a tiny, black, cracked fissure in the form of an "X".

"Huh, bit of an odd choice for an icon..." Tom muttered to himself. Satisfied that the game had installed itself, Tom closed the laptop and sat back down on the couch, wanting to finish watching his movie before playing it.

Once Dark Knight had finished, Tom turned Netflix off, got up and grabbed his laptop and got himself back on the couch.

"All right, Kyle." Tom said, moving his mouse toward the "X" icon and double clicking it. "Let's see what's so great about this game of yours."

Tom waited until his screen went black, this time he knew the game was starting up.

After a while, he heard something as he continued looking at the screen: quiet but noticable. A music box playing slowly. He recognized the song. It was the theme song to the very first Sonic the Hedgehog game, except it only played the first few notes twice before ending.

The black screen changed as soon as the song ended, Tom saw on the screen a background of a sunny blue sky with white clouds floating by slowly to the left. On the center in front of the clouds was the title "SONIC" in that familiar title text in most Sonic titles, the captions "Press ENTER" flashing below it. Tom pressed "ENTER" as instructed, and the title screen faded into the sky background with a computerized "blip" sound, and then a voice spoke up.

Tom had jumped, startled from how sudden the voice came from the computer. It was a strange voice. It sounded like a young man's, at least somewhat younger than him, except it sounded...off. It wasn't just the fact that it spoke in a friendly, almost child-like manner, but Tom could tell by just listening to the voice that there was something not right about it, like it sounded....fake.

"Hiya! Do you wanna play a game with me?"

The screen faded to black and then two options appeared: "Yes" and "No." His curiosity still maintained, Tom clicked "Yes". The voice spoke again.

"Awesome! I already got the perfect game we can play. One of my favorites!"

Tom began to detect a slight familiarity to the tone of the voice, it was like whoever was speaking was trying to sound like Sonic the Hedgehog. It was pretty good attempt, but Tom couldn't shake the feeling that there was something wrong with the way it sounded, the playfulness of the voice didn't really help neither.

The screen changed into what appeared to be a dimly lit room, with three large old TV screens lined up on the floor. A yellow arrow blinked toward the right next to the third TV, showing more TV screens. Captions were above the screens reading, "Choose a player".

Tom looked at the TVs, their screens were showing images of numerous Sonic characters: First was Tails the Fox, then Knuckles the Echidna, then Dr. Eggman, then Silver the Hedgehog, then Amy Rose, then Shadow the Hedgehog, then Rouge the Bat, followed by many other Sonic characters, a few of which Tom didn't recognize.

Tom was rather surprised by the selection of characters for him to choose from, though he had already come to the conclusion that this wasn't a game SEGA had created. Looking through the selection using the arrow keys he stopped to Silver. Thinking it over, Tom had remembered he always loved playing as Silver in Sonic 06, as well as playing as him in Sonic Rivals and the Mario and Sonic games. Filled with nostalgia, he pressed "Enter" on Silver's TV, the voice spoke again.

"Silver, huh? Is that your favorite?"

The "Yes" and "No" options appeared again. Tom was rather surprised at how the game guessed that Silver was his favorite character, but he rationalized that it could have just been part of the overall gaming mechanic. If this game was indeed made by a fan of the Sonic franchise, then perhaps the creator wanted to cater the

player's needs by letting them play as their favorite character. With that resolve, Tom selected "Yes".

The voice laughed as the screen faded to black. The laugh made Tom tense up; it was an unsettling, unfitting sort of laugh. A kind of high, whooping, clown-like sort of laugh.

"Glad I guessed right! Okay, The first game we're gonna play is "Hide and Seek". All you gotta do is remain hidden...and don't let me catch you."

Tom had noticed a growl under the excitement of the voice. The way it had said "don't let me catch you" sounded almost *too* excited. Almost predatorial...

The screen faded and Tom saw he was playing as Tails. Tom looked at the screen in confusion -- didn't he just pick Silver to play as? Why was he playing as Tails instead?

Already this game was giving off very weird vibes for Tom, but his curiousity remained steady. The game's graphics were 3D, and looked very good too, though Tom couldn't tell if the graphic quality was similar to that of Sonic Unleashed or Sonic Generations.

A small message popped up, saying "it's probably better if you play this with a controller." Tom promptly grabbed his Wired Xbox 360 Controller and plugged it into his laptop, and after fiddling with the options to make the controller work, he started moving Tails around and looked at the environment he was in. Tails was in a city; one completely devoid of life, and appeared to be somewhat in ruins, giving off a kind of dystopian kind of feel to the overall place. The sky was a perpetual cloudy dawn. Tom was amazed at the amount of detail of this empty ghost town he had Tails run around in, exploring districts and entering buildings. The way it all looked reminded him of the third segment of Speed Highway from Sonic Adventure, except made far more bigger, more open, and of course decrepit, silent with no music and lacking any characters, NPC or enemy.

Tom's amazement slowly changed to uncertainty and then worry the more he explored the city. He couldn't find a living soul anywhere within this quiet, bleak world. He was alone.

Suddenly, Tom's concern about finding any inhabitants in the ruined city was soon replaced with an increasingly overwhelming feeling, an ominous feeling he didn't think he'd feel over playing a video game. Tom couldn't put his finger on it, but he started to get the feeling he wasn't alone at all, that there was something...out there, in the same area as Tom. It wasn't like he was being watched, but more like

something was out there in the ruined city looking for him.

Tom felt fear welling up inside himself that he had never felt before. He wasn't concerned for his avatar, Tails. He couldn't explain it, but he felt like he personally was in some kind of danger. He had Tails run down streets because he didn't want to enter any of the buildings, fearing he'd be rendered helpless to whatever he was terrified of. Tom had also started to notice that it didn't seem like there was any way out of this huge empty city, either. If anything, it seemed like he was looping back to the same districts, the same buildings the further tried to go away from them.

By the the time Tails had entered the district that had plaza in it, the fountain being dry and one building nearby bent and on the verge of collapse, Tom had seen something nearby. Walking around the plaza rather casually was Sonic, except the more Tom looked at him, the more he began to notice how different Sonic's character model was, or at least more different in comparison to Tails.

Sonic's arms were completely blue, and he lacked gloves and shoes, his hands and feet blue as well. The color of his skin on his belly, ears and face appeared to be an odd pale color. The more Tom looked at this Sonic, who kept walking everso leisurely with his back towards Tails, unaware of Tom's character being in the same area as him, the more confused Tom was at his design. He just looked wrong.

The blue creature stopped in his tracks before he could take another step, his pose frozen in mid-walk. That overwhelming fear for his own life came back within Tom the more he stared at Sonic just standing there, his back towards Tails, in that frozen walking pose. Sonic then slowly turned to see Tails, and for the first time Tom got a good look at the creature's face.

Sure enough, this Sonic's skin color was an odd pale, but it was the eyes that caught Tom's attention the most. Sonic's eyes were normally green and conjoined together in every game he was in, and from what Tom had seen, this Sonic's eyes were split apart, like Tails' eyes, with the irises being pitch black instead, like Classic Sonic.

This strange-looking Sonic looked at Tails for a moment and then, to Tom's shock, slowly moved his eyes towards Tom. He couldn't believe it -- this Sonic was staring directly at him.

The blue creature smiled a cartoonishly wide kind of grin, and then spoke in the same voice he heard earlier on.

"Wow, you're not very good at this game, are you?"

Tom couldn't believe what he was seeing or hearing, his breathing increasing in speed as he stared at the screen. There was no way this creature was talking to him, looking at him. The creature laughed that high, clownish laugh, then spoke again, his voice more childish, more mocking, as if he was a kid bullying Tom.

"What's wrong? you act as if you never saw a Hedgehog before!"

Sonic took a step towards Tails. Tom then to his horror saw the black irises spreading over the creature's white eyes like holes crackling and increasing in size until the eyes were completely black, his smile widened more and Tom could see the creature had fangs. Large, sharp fangs, more fangs than what would normally fit in one's mouth.

This was not Sonic.

Tom immediately made Tails run from the creature as it continued to transform, as he did so he saw the look of terror on Tails' own face. Tom didn't stop to look at the creature as it transformed, he didn't want to see it. He had to get as far away from this thing, this monster...

Tom had made Tails enter a hotel, desperately looking for a place to hide. But then when he opened one door and ran inside, to Tom's surprise, he had ended up someplace entirely different. He could see flames burning all around Tails.

This time he was in a large forested area, fire everywhere. As Tom moved the camera to observe the inferno all around him, he could see the trauma and dispair on Tails' face, refusing to come more toward the flames no matter how much Tom made him move. This disturbed Tom, he felt an odd sense of pity for the poor fox boy.

Then the voice came again, that terrible fake teen voice.

"*This* room? Pfft, funnily enough this is his favorite place to be."

Tom moved the camera to see where the voice was coming from. He noticed, poking out from a bush, what appeared to be Sonic's head, except pale, dark-furred, and

with an odd looking face. The eyes are now just tiny black pinprick dots, and the smile was just a wide, black, curved line, like someone had drawn it on there with a marker or crayon.

Tom looked at the head in confusion. It seemed rather surreal. The way the head looked was like it could've been the head of a Sonic doll. The head rose up and Tom saw it ended on a thin, pitch black tendril of sorts, rising up from the ground like some kind of flower.

The doll-like head bobbed and swayed it's head rather lazily. Tom would have percieved it as harmless if not for the overwhelming terror he had been experiencing thus far, and he could see Tails was on the verge of tears as he cowered before this strange being.

The doll head spoke in the creature's voice, except now it's voice had changed, it was much more young, much more like a child's, and Tom could see that even though it spoke, its mouth didn't move at all.

"This adorable little foxy just loves to play with the fire here, don't you?"

Tom saw Tails shake his head no desperately, and he could also see Tails was trying to form words himself, but was too scared to speak.

The doll spoke to Tails, it's voice sweetly but just as mocking.

"What's wrong, buddy? Don't you like playing with me?"

Tails furiously shook his head in refusal, tears streaming down his face as he sat there looking at the doll head. The doll head giggled, a hint of the clownlike guffaw under that child's giggle as it swayed it's head more. It then responded in a condescendingly singsong kind of voice, a much more noticably audible growl on the last word as it stared down at him.

"Liar, liar....PANTS ON FIRE."

Suddenly, something erupted from the ground and wrapped itself around Tails' neck.

The fox yelped in pain as Tom realized that it was barbed wire. Tails clawed desperately at his own neck to remove the wire as it tightly wrapped around it, his neck starting to bleed as he choked and cried. While this was going on, fire began to spread around him until he was engulfed in it. Tom could do nothing but watch as the poor fox child writhed and screamed in the flames. He watched as Tails' yellow fur begin to blacken and burn, his eyes becoming bloodshot, his neck bleeding more as he screamed in agony and terror.

Tom then screamed as the doll head suddenly creeped up from the side of the screen dangerously up close, obscuring what was happening to Tails and looking directly at Tom. He could see the smile was becoming more real, and opening up to show those huge fangs. The tiny dots for eyes were growing in size and forming cracks on the doll's face, and two red dots began to glow from within the blackness of the widening eyes. That horrifying clown laugh was present with the screaming, even though the doll's lips still didn't move.

Tom had enough, this was too much. He immediately slammed his finger onto the power button and shut his computer off. A ringing silence came as his screen went to black.

Tom sat there panting, drenched in sweat. He could still hear the creature's laughter and Tail's screaming in his head before ebbing away.

"What...what the fuck, Kyle?" Tom sputtered in disbelief. What kind of game did Kyle buy? This was clearly not a game approved by SEGA. Sure they threw in a creepy message in Sonic CD to scare away hackers, but there was no way they would develop a game like this, let alone release it to the public.

Tom was convinced that the creature he saw in the game was not Sonic at all; not just by it's behavior, but also because of how the model looked, how it started to turn more monstrous and that doll head that he saw minutes before Tails got incinerated, everything about Sonic in that game was just completely wrong. It HAD to have been made by someone other than SEGA, because there was no possible way that thing actually *talked* to Tom, could there?

Tom runned his hands along his face with a sigh, feeling sleep overriding his stress over what had just transpired. "Ugh...It's just some freaky fan game. It's gotta be." He said to himself. Deciding to deal with it in the morning, Tom got up from his desk and went straight to bed, not even bothering to close his laptop or clean his mess. Tomorrow he would talk to his friends about the game and maybe continue playing it.

Hoping to shake off the feeling of dread and uncertainty, Tom slowly drifted to sleep.

4

"Maybe it was made by a some asshat who hated SEGA," Mike reasoned, as he, Tom, Vicky, and Roger had lunch together the next day. "I mean, I can name quite a few people who don't like some of the more recent Sonic games."

"God, I sure hope so..." Tom muttered as he ate his nachos. The memory of seeing Tails' body get burned alive and then that Sonic doll head's horrid smile was still fresh within his mind still. "I will say this though, whoever made this game's got one hell of an imagination."

Roger drank his soup and then asked, "are you gonna play more of it later? Maybe we can watch you play it just to see what it's all about!"

"Oh no," Vicky interrupted, "I'm not gonna watch you guys play a game where Sonic is killing his best friends and shit. That's just not like him at all!"

"That's the thing though, Vick," Tom explained, "I dunno if that character really WAS Sonic. Even for a character model his design looked weird." He looked into his nachos as he continued eating, vividly remembering how the creature transformed. "...It's like it was someone pretending to be him, like the Sonic I saw was just some kinda costume the character was roaming around in."

Mike chuckled. "What is he, some kinda yandere fan of Sonic's? Looks like Amy's got competition!"

Vicky scoffed. "Oh please, like Amy EVER has a chance with Sonic, quite frankly I think Fiona's a better choice for Sonic."

Mike looked at his girlfriend with a quizzical look. "Who?" This made Tom and Roger stiffle laughs.

Vicky groaned. "One of these days I gotta introduce you to the Archie comics, Mike".

Before anyone could continue with the conversation, a loud scream broke out somewhere in the cafeteria. Tom, his friends and pretty much everyone else in the cafeteria spun their heads looking around for who was screaming in terror, and then Tom saw her; brunette cheerleader Rachel Falkner had bursted into the cafeteria sobbing hysterically for help until she collapsed to the ground, one of the teachers present in the cafeteria, an elderly man of Japanese origin, rushed to her and helped her up. Murmurs and whispers were all around as everyone watched the teacher

tried to calm Rachel down.

"What's wrong? What's going on, Ms. Falkner?" He asked.

Tom got up with his friends and they pushed through the crowd to see what was going on, Tom saw Rachel as the teacher tried to comfort her, Rachel was in tears and was struggling to form speech in her hysteria.

"IT'S-IT'S MS. WILKINSON!!!" Rachel sobbed, "SHE'S...SHE'S DEAD! SHE'S DEAD!!"

Tom's brain jammed for a moment as gasps of shock and more frantic whispers began to escalade. The Japanese teacher looked quite shocked himself. Ms. Wilkinson was the new teacher for English, having applied for the job two days after Kyle disappeared. She was quite a kind young woman that got along with nearly everybody.

"Dead?" The teacher asked, his voice shaking. "Are you sure, my dear?"

"YES!! YES!! I SAW HER! HER MOUTH, SHE...!!" Rachel sputtered.

Tom's jaw dropped the minute he heard "mouth"...

No...Could it be...?

"It's all right!" The teacher desperately told Rachel, before addressing the cafeteria, "All of you, return to your dormitories! Somebody get the principal! We need to call the police!"

All the students were escorted straight to their dormitories. Tom had to bid his friends farewell during the commotion, and immediately pulled out his phone, searched through his contacts until he found Detective Green's number and dialed it.

As he walked down the hall he waited until Green answered. "What's up, Tom?" Green asked.

"Detective Green, there's been another murder, and it's the same as everyone else." Tom explained as he entered his room, closing the door behind it.

"Wait, seriously?" Green asked quietly, a hint of fear in his voice.

"Yes," Tom confirmed, "a girl named Rachel just came into the cafeteria screaming about the body she found. The college is calling your station right now."

"I see..." Green muttered. "All right. I'm on my way over there. I already know where your room is so I'll pick you up there and we'll check it out, okay?"

"All right. See ya then," Tom said. With that he hung up and sat down looking up at the ceiling, trying to process what was going on.

Has Ms. Wilkinson *really* been murdered? Had Kyle's killer really returned to the college to look for another target? If so, why? Why *this* college of all places? Tom thought about what Green said, that the killer had to have been a psychopath. He tried to imagine the murderer, an insane individual that got his thrills just randomly killing anyone he wants, and somehow giving the cops the slip ever step of the way up until now. Tom shivered at the thought and tried to take his mind off the killer by turning to his laptop, open and its screen black, just as he left it last night. He got up to turn his laptop on, but when he did he spotted two things.

The first thing was the X icon on his screen. He was sure it became slightly bigger than the last time he saw it. The next was his battery, his battery was originally a good 95% when he played the game last night, but now it was at 36%. This confused Tom, because a computer battery wasn't supposed to go down go down when the computer was turned off. However, he assumed it was just a minor fluke and paid it no mind.

Turning his laptop off, he looked at Kyle's. Still at 11% like he left it, so he decided to unplug his charger from his laptop and plugged it into Kyle's to charge it. After that, he got up and turned on the TV to watch some anime while he waited for Green to show up.

Half an hour later, a knock on Tom's door prompted him to get up and answer it. To his relief it was Green and his sister Sarah.

"It's a good thing you called me, Tom," Derek said as he, Tom and Sarah walked to the crime scene. "If the college called first, it would have taken a while for just the cops to issue a warrant."

"Believe me, I wanna see this guy caught just as much as you guys do," Tom said flatly. "He's already taken Kyle, last thing I want is for any of my other friends getting killed."

"You're welcome to participate in the investigation if you wish, Tom. Of course, you'll have to stay outta our way sometimes for your own safety," Sarah explained as they took a turn, "and normally we don't allow citizens to get involved, but we're very low on leads as you already know."

"Yeah," Derek said. "And you look like a smart kid so as of right now you're our only lead on this situation. "

They eventually reached the crime scene, which was in the classroom Ms. Wilkinson taught English in. Before any of them could enter however a cop stopped them.

"Hold it right there, Green," the cop said putting a hand up. Tom got a look at the officer, dressed in typical police uniform. He didn't look like a very friendly looking

cop. He seemed a bit older than Green, red-haired, sharp-faced, pointed-nose, and had a bit of a sneering grin lingering on his face, Tom could see the prominent lines on the cop's face. "This is a crime scene, not a daycare center. That kid can't come in here," he said rather off-handedly.

"I'm aware of that, Officer Craven," Green said steadily, looking at the cop with obvious annoyance in his eyes. "However, he's with me. He's a witness to the last victim, and--"

"And because you don't got any leads he's basically all you got, huh?" Officer Craven interrupted, he chuckled. "Are you really so desperate to catching this guy that you gotta scrape the bottle of the barrel or something, Green?" Tom saw Derek's fists clench. It became clear to Tom from the conversation that Green and this cop did not see eye to eye.

"Look kid, here's some advice," Craven continued, looking at Tom now, his smug grin showing more. "You don't wanna get involved with this guy. He thinks he's some hero, but truth is, he's just a rookie on a wild goose chase."

Tom felt the annoyance that Green was feeling. Immediately he looked at Craven in the face and cooly said, "at least he's out chasing the bad guy insteada sitting around at his desk annoying everybody around him." Craven's smile dropped at that remark, Sarah tried to stifle a giggle and Tom could sense Green was smiling himself.

"All right. Excuse us, Officer Craven," Derek said as he, Sarah and Tom walked past Officer Craven, who was red in the face, hotly looking at the trio.

"So who was *that* guy?" Tom asked Green and Sarah.

"Officer Richard Craven," Green answered. "He's been harrassing me and Sarah ever since we took this case. Real type A personality that guy, around the precinct we call him 'Officer Dick'."

Sarah then said, "we suspect he's jealous of us trying to solve this case. To him, catching this psychopath is like winning a gold medal at an Olympic sport."

"Jeez, I musta been right on the nose with that remark then," Tom said, looking back to see Officer Craven back at his post.

"You've no idea," Green stated bitterly. "But don't worry, he's pretty much useless. Anyway, here we go." He gestured the two toward the crime scene.

Ms. Wilkinson's classroom was for the most part intact, though her desk was a mess. All that was on it had been knocked off and in their stead, lying flat on her back, was Ms. Wilkinson, just as Rachel described and just like Kyle; deathly pale, a look of shock on her face, her mouth wide, caked in blood, her jaw hanging

uselessly. Tom's stomach almost turned looking at the poor woman, seeing her corpse like this reminded him of how Kyle died.

"All right," Green began calmly, walking around examining the scene and the corpse, "so this one's more recent than the last one obviously. Judging by the state of things, she died sometime around 10: 30 to 11:30 pm last night."

"What was she doing here?" Tom asked, standing next to Sarah as they watched Derek.

"Most likely preparing to head home," Derek described, pointing at a folder containing today's homework and a purse. "She was preparing to leave the room before she was assaulted." Derek knelt down looking at all of the books, papers and the computer that were scattered on the floor around the desk. "The killer easily overpowered her. She couldn't even put up much of a struggle. He pretty much did his thing in no time flat."

"Jesus..." Tom whispered as he looked at Wilkinson's corpse. "What kinda maniac is capable of such brutality?"

"A freakin' animal, that's what," Green answered flatly. "But what's weird is that there's no signs of any entry or intrusion prior to the death."

"Wha...?" Tom looked at Green, surprised.

"That's another thing about the victims," Sarah explained. "Prior to all ther deaths, there haven't been a single sign of entry; the door or windows weren't open or unlocked, we even scanned for fingerprints. Nothing. Not even on the victims."

"Wait, seriously?" Tom asked, unsure if he heard correctly. "You guys saying this guy just appeared out of nowhere and killed people without touching them?"

"Well I mean, we don't wanna draw to any conclusions *yet*." Derek responded. "Point is, somebody *is* in fact doing this, as bizarre as it looks. There is one other thing, though..." Derek motioned to the computer laying on the floor, it's screen black and cracked. "In every single one of the murder we've investigated, we've also noticed that the victims' computers are also damaged in some way. Usually with laptops it's just the screen being damaged and the battery completely dead."

Thinking about it, Tom then inquired, "do you think the killer's destroying computers because they contained something he didn't want known?"

Green shook his head. "No, I don't. I mean, we originally thought that was in fact the case with the first murder. But all these deaths are just random civilians who have no association with one another. Not to mention when we repaired some of the laptops, they appeared to be completely free of any suspicious files. So that theory I'm afraid is out the door."

"Damn..." Tom cursed. It really did seem like they hit a dead end; a killer had been able to invade people's homes without leaving any signs of an entry or in fact any trace of his existence. Whoever this murderer was, not only was he a deranged individual, he was also *very* good at what he was doing, too.

"Detective Green," a voice from behind called out. The trio turned to see a cop at the door. "The Principal's looking for you, he said he needs your help with the assembly".

"Ah jeez..." Green grumbled. "I always hate having to be a part of such announcements."

"You better head on back over to your dorm room, Tom," Sarah suggested.

Tom nodded. "All right."

"And Tom," Derek spoke up before Tom turned to leave, "Remember you're a part of this investigation now. It's up to you to look for anything you think might help. If you find anything or if anything happens..."

"I'll be sure to come to you straightaway," Tom immediately finished. "This guy killed Kyle, I'm not taking any chances and let him kill anyone else." With that he bid Derek and Sarah farewell and headed straight back to his dorm room, thoughts of what had transpired swimming through his head like a whirlpool in the deep, deep ocean.

A lot of things didn't seem to make sense to Tom. He tried to examine all that he knew so far about the murders. One, the killer had somehow entered the victim's home without leaving any traces of his presence or a break-in. Two, he had been pulling open the victim's mouth to the point of tearing the jaw off almost completely, as well as severely damaging the inside of their throats and chests afterward. And three, the computers were ending up broken during the time of murder, with their screens cracked and their batteries dead.

Tom did not want to imagine the possibility of there being any supernatural forces at work, despite the rising amount of evidence to the contrary. It just seemed too ridiculous and perhaps too horrifying for Tom to think about. He always believed that the world we all lived in was a world of reason. There was always a justifiable explanation behind every occurence, event or action, always a means to an end. Everything had a *reason.*

Hoping to find answers through Kyle's laptop, he returned to his dorm room and plugged the charger into it.

The assembly began about an hour later. Tom, among many other students looked

up at the stage in the attrium while other quietly chatted amongst themselves as Principal Sullivan, a man that looked to be in his forties, walked up to the podium, a solemn look on his face. Tom could also see Detective Green on the stage as well, sitting next to several teachers.

"Attention students," Sullivan spoke before clearing his throat. "As I'm sure several of you are aware, we have lost a recent and valuable member of our faculty. English teacher, Diane Wilkinson....was confirmed dead earlier this morning, possibly murdered by the same unknown assailant that had taken the life of one Kyle Scott."

Several students chatted in surprise and shock amongst themselves, while others called out to the stage, demanding an explanation. Tom remained silent with his friends watching Principal Sullivan quiet the entire student body to continue his speech.

"Now I know this seems like quite a terrible shock, and a tragedy," Sullivan continued, "But let us not feel discouraged. We will have time...to mourn the loss of a fellow teacher in this faculty, and I assure you the police are doing everything they can to search and catch the killer. The one leading the investigation, Detective Derek Green..." He gestured for Green to take the stand, "...would like to say a few words with you all. Please give him your undivided attention."

The principal stepped aside and allowed Green to come up to the podium, testing the mic, Green began talking.

"Greetings everyone. I just want to say that I deeply apologize for the recent couple of tragedies that have taken place. No decent human being should have to suffer to such a barbaric manner, let alone murdered at all. That is why I want to assure you that we are doing everything in our power to find and arrest this person before he gets away with any more murders. Even though you are all sleeping, eating and are being educated in this establishment, like any other ordinary college...the fact still stands. A killer is still out there and you are all not safe. If any of you see anything suspicious, go to any of your teachers that are nearby straightaway. Whoever this killer is, it's likely he'll come back to continue his work, but know that you have the law on your side. We won't rest until we've found and apprehended the murderer. I cannot promise you the guarantee of your safety. But I *will* promise you this: As long as the law exists on this planet somewhere, somehow, this man *will* be brought to justice...and it *will* be certain that he won't hurt another innocent human being ever again. Thank you for your time."

As Green left the podium, Tom felt a strong feeling in his heart as he watched him take his seat. Green's speech brought confidence back to Tom. Even though the situation as of right now seemed troubling, Tom was no doubt certain that the chances of the killer succeeding in another death had gone slim. Everyone was prepared for his return this time.

"That will be all for now, students," Principal Sullivan stated. "You may all return to your dorm rooms. And remember, be careful."

"Do you guys think the killer's really gonna try to come back for another round?" Vicky asked with a tone of deep uncertainty as she, Tom, Roger and Mike walked down the hall.

"Of course he's gonna!" Mike scoffed. "He's already iced Kyle AND Wilkinson, if he's able to sneak into this school twice it'll pretty much be a cakewalk the third time."

Tom shook his head, "Nah, I don't think he's gonna risk it. If everyone's now aware he's been targeting this college, chances are he's gonna lay low for a while....I'm kinda HOPING he shows up so we can catch him."

"Wouldn't it be insane if the four of us actually caught the bastard ourselves?" Roger asked.

"That'd be cool," Mike said grinning, already imagining the scenario in his head, "I mean, there's only four of US and only one of HIM! Plus I'm the class football champ, he'd HAFTA think twice before trying to kill me!"

"Pfft, I don't think the killer's gonna care if you play college ball Mike," Tom admitted. "From what Detective Green's told me, the dude's crazy enough to kill *anyone* he sees, and from what I seen in the photos..."

"Don't say that!" Vicky snapped, hugging Mike who put his hand on her arm. "That creep isn't going anywhere NEAR my Michael!"

"Baaaaabe..." Mike groaned embarressedly.

"Don't worry guys," Tom assured them looking at all three of them as they took a turn down the hall. "I'm not gonna let this asshole get you guys. It's bad enough Kyle's gone, but I'm gonna see to it this guy is behind bars before he so much lays a finger on any of ya."

"Heh, thanks Tom," Roger said appreciatedly, putting his hand on Tom's shoulder.

"Ohhhh Tom!" Vicky tearfully exclaimed, running over to Tom to hug him.

"Goddamn, man..." Mike said quietly, almost chokingly. "You really know how to move a guy with yer words..."

As they reached the door to Tom's dorm, Tom then said, "Heh, anyway. I'm probably gonna continue playing some more of that weird game Kyle played in a bit, anybody wanna watch?"

"Sure, you can count me in!" Roger said enthusiastically.

"Hell yeah, dude!" Mike agreed, "I wanna see what this freaky ass game's all about."

"...Meh, I've got nothing else better to do, and I kinda need something to help me get all this murderer talk off my mind, so I'm in too." Vicky shrugged with a smile.

"Oh hey!" Mike interjected before Tom put his hand on the door, "Why not make this more fun? The classroom for Anime Club's still open right now, why don't we link Tom's laptop to the projector and we can watch his game on the projector screen!"

"Are we allowed to do that?" Vicky asked.

"Probably not..." Tom answered, unsure of himself.

"Aw, come on." Mike nudged Tom in the shoulder with a sly grin. "Yer only gonna play the game for a little bit today, right? We'll be outta the Anime Club classroom before anyone has a chance to spot us!"

Tom thought about it. Perhaps if they were only in there for a *little* while...

"...Ehh, all right. I'm sold." Tom stated. "Lemme go grab my laptop and we can get going."

With that, his friends patiently waited as Tom ran into his dorm room and grabbed his laptop, and together they set off to the classroom.

5

Sure enough, the door was open. Tom, Roger, Mike and Vicky entered the classroom. The classroom that the Anime Club took place in was a fairly large room found on the first floor of the college. Tom placed his laptop on a desk while Mike searched for the projector. Vicky sat at a desk while Roger pulled down the projector screen.

"Ah! Found it!" Mike pulled out the projector as well as the cable required from the closet and brought it over to Tom, who looked it over and worked on it as Mike plugged it into the wall to power it, using the remote to turn it on.

After getting everything plugged in, Tom looked to see his desktop on the projection screen. "All right, we're all set. You guys ready?"

"Yeah." Roger nodded.

"Hell yeah, man." Mike agreed, sitting next to Vicky.

"That's a weird looking game icon you got there, Tom," Vicky commented, pointing at the X-shaped fissure icon.

"I know right? It's totally fucking w--" Tom's voice halted as he looked at the X on his screen...

Was his eyes playing tricks with him, or was the X icon even bigger than the last time he saw it? The lines looked as if they had lengthened slightly, a few more cracks forming from the fissure.

"Hey....Does...Does that X look bigger to you guys?" Tom asked quietly.

"Whaddya mean?" Roger asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Yeah, I mean this IS a pretty big projection," Mike said cluelessly.

"Huh..." Tom was feeling that old sense of dread from before the last time he played this game. He was worried about what this could all mean, what might happen.... would he see that creature again? Would *they* see it? Tom ultimately decided to suppress these doubts, for the sake of entertaining his friends with this game and to see for himself what else this game had to offer. "It's....Nevermind. Let's just get to playing." He moved the mouse over to the icon, clicked it, and then waited, watching the screen on his laptop as his friends watched the projection screen sitting ahead of him while he sat behind them with his laptop.

Just like last time, the screen went black, then silence. but instead of hearing the Green Hill music box like last time, it immediately cut to the sky background with the "SONIC" title, this surprised Tom a little bit but he ignored it and just pressed Enter, hearing Vicky eagerly say, "I like that sky background! It looks so peaceful..."

And then, once again, that creature's voice.

"Hiya! Glad to see you're back."

"Hey, it's Sonic!" Mike exclaimed with surprise.

"No, it's not..." Tom assured him, a hint of worry in his voice. They weren't with him the first time he played the game. Hearing that voice already sent a chill to Tom, he was worried about what might happen, but he wasn't going to back out now. He continued listening to the voice as it continued talking.

"I haven't decided on a new game this time, I've had a bit of a busy day. So instead I'm just gonna drop someone into a new room for you. Feel free to explore! Nobody's going anywhere, after all."

As the voice laughed, with Roger sarcastically commenting, "oh yeah, *that* laugh's not gonna get annoying anytime soon," Tom reflected on the way the creature's voice worded all that, dread already steeled him to be ready for whatever could happen.

The screen faded to a new location. Tom wasn't sure if this was still part of the ruined city level; It looked like a long hallway lined with many doors. The overall bright theme of the place made it look like this was a hallway in a hotel, Tom moved the camera to see, to his surprise, he was playing as a new character: Sally Acorn.

"Hey, it's that--that chick that Sonic hung out with in that one cartoon!" Mike spoke up, snapping his fingers as if he struck a thought.

"You mean Sally?" Vicky asked him as Tom moved her down the hall of doors.

"That's what she's called?" Mike responded. "Huh, the more you know."

Tom meanwhile was unsure about which door to enter. He didn't want to risk falling for a trap, but at the same time he wanted to see what else was in the game.

Roger then spoke up. "Go through that door!" Tom looked up to see Roger was pointing at a door right next to Sally on his left. Tom moved to the door and had Sally open it,

Sally had entered a strange room, it was a large room, except it seemed....Distorted. Furniture looked like they were slanted or twisted, deformed, and on the walls and ceiling, both of which seemed crooked and bent in bizarre ways. If Tom wasn't unnerved by the whole experience, he would have assumed this room would have belonged to a funhouse at a carnival. Tom heard Mike comment with a loud, "duuude, this is fuckin' awesome!" as he had Sally explore the distorted room for another door.

Eventually, Tom found one after wandering through the room, and so he had it opened and then he found Sally entering another room, one that for some reason disturbed Tom even more.

It was another large room, except it wasn't all distorted or deformed like the previous one. Instead it was a nice looking, dimly-lit room. But that wasn't what Tom or the others had noticed -- in the center of the room suspended by what looked like strings was what looked like a red fox.

"Oh my god, that's Fiona!" Vicky suddenly shouted in surprise as Tom had Sally walk closer to get a good look at her.

"Who's Fiona?" Mike asked confused.

"Fiona Fox, you dumbass," Vicky answered rather irritably.

"Holy shit it is..." Tom muttered. Indeed, it was Fiona Fox from the Archie Comics. She seemed to wear only a bra and panties and was strung up and suspended by the strings like she was some kind of puppet, her head drooping down. She looked unconscious. They also began to notice how beat up she looked; her hair was a mess, her fur seemed unkempt, and there was a map of surgical scars all over her body, some of them appearing to be recent, as if someone performed a live autopsy on her.

Suddenly they all jumped as Fiona's head shot up with a sharp gasp, her eyes wide and terrified. She looked at Sally and then she spoke, her voice tiny, weak and scared. "Help me... Get me out of here... Please... Before he comes back..."

"This is fucked up..." Roger said, clearly disturbed by the predicament Fiona was in.

"No fucking kidding," Mike agreed, Vicky nodded looking at Fiona, a hand over her mouth as the poor female fox was breaking down in tears in her begging.

"Please... You have to get me out of here... I can't take another one..."

"Tom, let's go into another room, this is starting to freak me out," Roger said, looking at Tom.

"Don't hafta tell ME twice," Tom nodded, already scared by what was going on. He had Sally head out the door he came from, as he did Fiona started to protest, her voice rising in fear.

"No...No don't go...Don't go please! Don't leave me in here! DON'T LEAVE ME IN HERE!"

The minute Sally was out the door, Fiona's frantic screams for help immediately stopped, as if somebody had muted her.

Tom and his friends were in shock. The room Sally had entered was not the room he was in before. It was a disturbing looking room, far more surreal than the distorted room from earlier. Spatious, many-angled, the spatial or geometrical logic of this room was completely wrong. Tom had felt like he was looking at M.C. Esher's "Relativity" painting with this room, with the stairs and doorways all being in places they couldn't, *shouldn't*, have been in.

"Whaaaaa the fuuuuck...?" Mike exclaimed breathlessly, looking at the strage sight of the room Sally was currently in. "Weren't we just in that funhouse room not too

long ago??"

"This is getting goddamn freaky...I dunno if we should keep playing this guys..." Vicky said, an obvious hint of fear in her voice.

"Just what *is* this game...?" Tom thought, as he had Sally traversing the room. He watched as instead of going up one of the stairs, the stairs looked like they were going sideways instead of up, towards a door that looked like it was upside down.

After opening the door, Tom and his friends became even more confused as Sally had entered another completely different room, this one not as distorted or many-angled, but instead he entered a dilapidated street. Tom was back in the ruined city area.

"Whoa...Talk about yer fixer-upper, this place," Mike commented as Tom had Sally traverse the city.

"This game is REALLY weird..." Roger mumbled, sitting back with a sigh.

Tom was on the alert by this point, the last time he was in the ruined city he stumbled across that Sonic creature. Thankfully his fears subsided as it felt like the creature wasn't here this time as he explored it.

Suddenly, those fears immediately shot back the minute he heard the clown-like laughter again, echoing across the silence of the city, the sudden abruptness of the laughter making all his friends jump.

"Fucking hell...!" Roger gasped.

"Who the hell's laughing???" Mike asked in a demanding tone.

Just then, Tom's screen froze and suddenly started to glitch and distort. It also started to heat up at an alarming rate, withdrawing his hands from it he looked up at the projector screen, his heart momentarily stopping the minute he looked.

The creature was in the projector screen, facing a brick wall, his back towards Tom and his friends, and Sally was nowhere to be seen. This confused Tom as the projector screen was running perfectly fine even though his laptop screen was getting eaten up by pure glitch.

"Hey, it's Sonic!" Mike spoke up.

"Why are his arms blue?" Roger asked, a look of concern on his face.

The creature's head slowly turned....and turned....and turned until it was looking directly behind him, looking at Tom and his friends who were now looking at this creature face to face. The creature was smiling a demented smile, and spoke in that fake Sonic voice, which was now a slow, airy, eerily perverted tone, as the rest of

his body twisted until his whole front side was facing them.

"So many souls to play with...so little time..."

And then, the creature began to transform again.

Tom's friends shot out of their seats and backed themselves towards Tom in fear as they watched the monster's eyes blacken, his smile widening and showing fangs. Tom could see the creature was growing taller and lankier, his limbs looking like they were stretching out of the skin, revealing nothing but black as the fur darkened and grew more wild, the skin more sickly pale. An X shaped cut began to form across the creature's chest, and cracks were forming from the blackness of the eyes over the dark blue fur. The sight of this thing was truly monstrous.

"What the fuck is that?! WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!" Mike screamed, clinging onto his terrfied girlfriend as he saw the creature transform.

"I DON'T FUCKING KNOW!" Vicky yelled in response, who was clinging onto Mike herself, eyes wide with shock.

Tom was at a loss for words as he looked at the creature's smiling face. Two red dots faded into view on it's black eyes as it's head tilted slightly and it spoke again, it's voice more feral, more vicious.

"...Wouldn't you ALL agree?"

The creature then began to reach a hand towards them, as if he was planning to grab them, and Tom could see his hand was black, ending in long, sharp claws.

"Tom, turn it off! TURN IT OFF!" Roger screamed, and as everyone was backing away and screaming in terror Tom began to see why. The hand looked like it was actually coming out of the projection screen towards them!

In a moment of fright and instinct, Tom lunged toward his laptop and slammed his finger onto the power button regardless of how hot the computer was, shutting it down as he unplugged it from the projector, which also turned off. The giant black clawed hand that was in the room with them was gone.

Silence.

Tom was sweating and breathing quickly as he looked at his laptop's black screen, Mike had fallen over a desk in his panic and Vicky was on the floor with him, hugging him while looking at the blank projector screen. Roger was backed up against a wall.

"....You all saw that right?" He shakingly sputtered. "I mean...It wasn't just me, you all SAW that right??"

"God I hope we didn't..." Tom muttered in response.

"What...the FUCK was that???" Mike asked a third time as Vicky helped him up.

"Tom what the hell kind of game did Kyle give you?" Vicky demanded to know, desperate.

"I don't know!" Tom responded defensively. "Whatever that thing is that we just saw, that is *defintely* not Sonic."

"Yeah, no shit man!" Mike groaned.

Suddenly the classroom door opened before anyone could say anything and then a teacher came in.

"What the hell is going on in here?" The teacher demanded. "You four shouldn't be in here during the evening, especially when there's a killer on the loose!"

Tom and his friends tried to explain the situation to the teacher, but he wouldn't have any of it.

"Enough excuses." He grumpily stated. "Just get back to your dorm rooms and don't let me catch any of you out of your dorm rooms."

Without saying anything they left the room, Tom carrying his laptop. After a while they began conversation.

"Jesus fuck that was weird," Roger spoke up.

"No kidding, I KNEW that thing was a friggin' Sonic fanboy," Mike replied.

"Do you think we all just imagined that hand coming out?" Roger asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

"How could we all imagine it?" Vicky asked in return, a look of doubt on her face.

"I dunno! But there's NO way that coulda been real. We HAD to have hallucinated it." Tom was sure Roger was in a small state of denial from what had just happened, but he didn't feel like calling him out on it. Right now he had other things on his mind...

"Anyway, we should probably head back into our dorms. That was a weird game Tom, but it was fun hanging out with you during it," Roger said.

"Yeah, you too, man," Tom responded. "See you guys later."

With that, everyone went their separate ways in the hallway and Tom went to his own dorm room, placing his laptop on his desk and sitting on his bed, looking back on what had occured moments before.

Did he and his friends really hallucinate it, or did that creature actually try to grab them? Tom honestly couldn't think of a way to rationalize what had happened, as much as he deeply wanted to. He didn't want to admit what he had experienced was something supernatural, and that there wasn't a rational way to explain what had happened. That scared him, as he also began to think of how coincidental this all seemed, a killer was targeting the college, and now this...

Tomorrow was the weekend, as Tom settled for bed, he resolved to look more into the case Green was investigating.

The next day, Tom headed for the library, hoping to find something that could prove useful to the investigation. After signing in he looked through the books first on his way to the computers, after a short browse he stumbled across probably one of his more favorite books, *Beneath the layers of Reality - by Jack Cranely.* He was a fan of Jack Cranely's novels and thought about checking out a couple copies himself once he was done.

He sat down in front of a computer, logged in using his student ID, and began his research.

He went on Google and then searched up on the murders, being sure to specify the snapped jaws and the broken laptops as he did so. Not surprisingly, a lot of articles regarding the murders came up. Tom looked through one, same details as what Green told him; people found in their homes, mouthes ripped open, their esophagus torn apart on the inside, their laptops damaged in some way, everything.

He looked through several more articles. He was still quite surprised at how many people had been killed in such a cruel and monstrous way, but nevertheless he continued reading.

Eventually he came across peculiar unrelated stories in these articles, particularly ones about a cult that seemed to have become active around the same time the murders started. Tom thought of this as odd, but he figured he'd ask Green about it when he called him again.

Then, Tom began to wonder something. Remembering Derek saying how the

computers were always found with their screens broken and their batteries completely drained, he then proceeded to look up on how it was happening. Unfortunately, to his disappointment, most of his searches ended up resulting in the usual articles regarding computer's batteries dying, such as old batteries, poor CPU design, or overall negligence.

He then began to think about what the creature said last time he played the game. "So many souls to play with..." He repeated the words in his thoughts...

When he Googled souls, he found an interesting article called the "21 Grams Experiment", a scientific study back in the early 1900s, theorizing how human souls had mass. A soul is believed to weigh specifically twenty-one grams, and when the body dies and the soul leaves the body, the body itself loses at least three-fourths of an ounce of it's own weight, or twenty-one grams, just like the soul.

However, before Tom could continue reading any more, he heard the college intercom go off. His blood ran cold the minute he heard the announcer's voice, unnerved and slightly shaken.

"Attention all students. Th-there's been another murder. All students report to the attrium immediately."

6

The assembly this time was regarding the murders that had been announced. Three people had been found dead this time: two students and another teacher. The college was in a state of panic from this revelation, but the Principal tried his best to quell the fears and questions of the student body.

"Because of these recent kills, these new rules will be put into effect as of right now," he explained with a look of minor dismay and frustration. "Firstly, all students are to return to their dorm rooms by 6 pm every evening and they are to stay there. Secondly, all students are to be taken to their classes by a teacher, no exceptions. I know these rules seem unreasonable, but I promise you they are for your own safety. The police are still doing everything they can to capture the killer, please remain calm."

"Yeah right," Mike grunted as the assembly ended. "This college is gonna get closed faster than Marvin Roberts breaking his marathon record."

Tom's worries, meanwhile, were starting to increase by the hour. He couldn't stop thinking about how the computers during the murders always had their batteries die as well as what he Googled about bodies losing weight when the soul leaves. After the assembly, he sat on his couch watching Kyle's laptop charge up. 36% power.

Because of what he had researched, he wanted to call Green about the autopsies to see if it was true. So he dialed up Green.

"What's up Tom?" Green asked when he answered.

"Hey...Sorry I didn't talk to you when the bodies were discovered," Tom admitted.

"It's no trouble, that's work for ya honestly," Green responded assuringly. "Anyway, what's on your mind?"

"Umm, I wanna ask you a question...About the bodies," Tom began. "When you had all the autopsies performed. Was there anything in the reports about their body weight?"

"....Ummm...There might be. I'll have Sarah bring the autopsy report real quick," Green answered, and then asked, "why do you ask? Did you find something that might help?"

Tom was not sure about how to explain himself to Green. He wanted to tell him about what he found about the 21 Grams theory, but he didn't want to seem crazy. So instead he said, "sort of. I might have found something that *might* be somewhat useful if not at the very least informative. I also want to ask you another question."

"Sure thing, what is it?"

"Well...while I was looking up old news articles about the murders you covered," Tom explained, "I also found a couple articles about some whackadoo cult. Said they were founded sometime around the time the murders happened. Is that true?"

"Ahh..." Green responded, his voice sounding like he knew exactly what Tom was talking about. "I had a feeling you'd come across that. Yeah, sometime after....Maybe the first 5 or 6 murders? This group started popping up all over the media. A bunch of psychotic oddballs, but they don't seem crazy enough to warrant an arrest compared to this case, though I have my suspicions about them. They call themselves the Cult of X."

Tom froze. Surely, he didn't hear Green right...

"....I'm...I'm sorry I didn't get that," Tom spoke breathlessly. "What did you say they were called?"

"The Cult of X," Derek confirmed in response. "Again, a bunch of crazies."

It felt like Tom's brain was going numb, he was looking at his own laptop like he was looking at that monster that he had seen once again. He felt his heart pound in shock as realization began to run him over like the world's most harshest sledgehammer.

When Tom spoke up again, his voice was quiet and quivering. "X...Y-you don't say..."

"Something wrong, Tom?" Green asked in a tone of concern.

"It's uh....It's nothing," Tom cleared his throat. "I just had a thought, is all. Did Sarah get those reports yet?"

"Uhhhmmm..." Green trailed off before, "Ahh, yeah she did. Lessee...weight, weight, weight...Here we go. The latest victim originally weighed 155 pounds before he died."

Dread built up within Tom. He then calmly asked, "did he lose weight or something?"

"Uhh...Yeah, about 21 Grams, actually," Green answered.

Tom's breath was shallow. He was in shock, he couldn't believe what he was being told. Fearing upon fear, hoping against hope his next question wasn't answered correctly, he then asked, "D-Did all of them lose 21 grams in weight?"

He had to sit down as soon as he heard the response.

"Errmmm.....Holy shit...Yeah, they *all* did." Green said in surprise. "How did you...?"

"Part of the research I looked up," Tom interrupted. "Are you familiar with a theory called "the 21 Grams Experiment"?"

"A theory by Duncan MacDonald in 1907. He believed the human soul weighed 21 grams, but what does that have to do with this case?" Green asked, a tone of doubt in his voice.

"I'm not 100% sure," Tom answered honestly. "I mean, I don't want to assume anything supernatural is happening, but...That Cult of X you mentioned? I think they have something to do with the murders."

"....That seems like a bit of a serious thought you got there, Tom," Green said, concerned. "Do you got any evidence to support that?"

"Not just yet, I'm operating on a hunch." Tom had his eyes deadly set on his laptop, closed and sitting quietly on his desk. "But still, it seems weird doesn't it? I mean these murders start happening and then suddenly this cult starts showing up? That just seems a bit *too* coincidental."

A brief pause, and then Derek spoke up again.

"....Now that you mention it, the timing *does* seem rather odd. I'm gonna talk to Sarah about it and we'll look into it. I'm trusting you on this theory of yours Tom, you understand what that might mean, right?"

"I know. To be honest, I WANT to be proven wrong," Tom admitted, genuine worry coming from his voice as he spoke. "Something fucking weird's going on here, Detective Green, and I'm starting to worry about the safety of everyone here, especially my friends. I honestly don't know if I'm going crazy from Kyle being fucking dead or this whole serial killer shit, but I'm starting to get fucking scared..."

Another pause, and then Green responded, his tone more calm, more assuring than it ever was, an almost caring tone.

"...Tom, please calm down. I know you're afraid right now, but you need to be strong, especially for your friends. I'll get to the bottom of this for you. I dunno how, but I promise you, I'm gonna find this guy and I'm gonna stop him."

That calmed Tom down significantly. Green's words renewed his confidence in the detective, deep breaths, he said in a breath of relief, "all right. Thank you, Detective."

"You're welcome. I gotta get going. Call me if anything happens alright?"

"I will. Again, thanks. Cya." With that, he and Green hung up. Tom sat back on his couch, trying to recollect his thoughts.

It was all starting to make sense now: there was a killer going around brutally murdering people and somehow getting away with it. How was he killing people? Somehow, as ridiculous as Tom percieved it, he was stealing their souls. He couldn't figure out how the killer was doing it but somehow it involved forcing open their jaws to the point of breaking and their insides getting ruptured. How was he getting away with it? He never had to enter or leave the crime scene, he was always already there.

The computers were damaged and lacking battery power because that was where the killer was hiding in, and that was how he had gotten away with killing all those people, Kyle and those who died at the college. All the murders that were taking place within the college all started with Kyle's death.

That letter that came with the game disc, Tom had realized, was not written by Kyle. He had to assume that it was done by the Cult of X, the fanatic group that suddenly appeared as the murders started many months back, which meant Kyle had to have gotten the game from the Cult somehow, albeit unwittingly. The "X" of the Cult...Tom was sure it was the same "X" as the icon on his desktop, and the same as the "X" burned onto the game's disc.

"X..." Tom whispered.

He grunted in frustration as he clutched his head. It ached as more unanswered questions formed in his head. The idea of a video game being taken around stealing people souls was beyond anything Tom could accept as rational for a murder case...

Tom stopped and then slowly looked at his laptop. And then he begain to harvest a very dangerous thought...

...Maybe he'd get some answers by confronting the killer himself.

Tom could feel every second of hesitation as he sat down, eyes locked down at his closed laptop. It had remained shut down since the creature tried to grab him and his friends back in the Anime Club room. His heart pounding, he felt like he was preparing to open Pandora's Box, but taking in a deep breath, Tom opened up his laptop and turned it on.

He audibly groaned in shock and outrage when he saw the two things on his desktop. First was the X icon on the center of his screen. It had certainly grown noticibly larger this time, he was sure of it, a large, dark, cracked, X-shaped fissure. The second thing Tom spotted was the battery power. It was at 3%.

"God fucking dammit!" Tom shouted in anger at the laptop, like he was actually speaking to the creature that was hiding inside it. Frustrated, he yanked the charger off of Kyle's laptop, now at 57% power, and jammed the charger into his own to charge it back up. "The one fucking time I actually wanted to FACE you, dick!"

He jumped back up from his chair and stormed out of his room, leaving the laptop to let it charge back up and for him to cool off.

Tom, Roger and Mike were sitting in the cafeteria during lunch. Tom had explained to them both on what was going on and what he had pieced together.

"Whoa...Dude what the hell are you smoking?" Mike exclaimed, dumbfounded.

"I ain't smoking anything, dumbass," Tom retorted. "I think that Sonic...That THING we all saw in Anime Club...I think *that's* who's been killing everyone."

"Goddamn...Well, when you bring in the timing of it all, the cult, not-Kyle's letter, and how easily the psycho is getting away with killing everyone, it does actually seem to make sense," Roger said, clearly thinking it over. "Jesus, he's been killing right under everyone's noses and nobody even suspected it."

"Man, fuck that," Mike scoffed. "I'll believe Sonic is trying to steal people's souls when I actually SEE it. I mean, we don't even know HOW he's doing it!"

"I know, and that's what worries me," Tom replied, concerned. "We have an inhuman killer in this college and we've NO clue what he's capable of."

"Do you think we should tell somebody about this?" Roger asked.

"Oh and what, make us all look like a buncha crazies?" Mike asked back. "Hell, I betcha people would start thinking *we're* the killer!"

"...I wouldn't worry about that honestly," Roger quietly said. "It seems like less and less students are coming to class." He gestures all around the cafeteria, prompting Mike and Tom to look around.

Tom was rather surprised he hadn't notice it, but indeed. The number of students present in the cafeteria seemed to have reduced. Tom did a head count to confirm it.

Mike shrugged. "Maybe they're all at a club, or maybe they're sick."

"Mike you better fucking hope yer right about that, or I swear to God, someday I'm gonna strangle you," Tom said in his most serious tone as he did another head count.

His head counting was immediately cut short the minute he saw Vicky running toward them. "Hey, Vick's comin, guys." This prompted Mike to shoot back up to greet her.

"Hey baby! What's--" His voice falters when he sees the look of worry on her exhausted face, she looks at the trio.

"I can't find Alana anywhere!" She gasped in desperation.

"What?" Tom asked, standing up as well.

"You serious?" Roger asked.

"Yes! I went into her room to come visit her, and she was gone!" Vicky shouted, "Do you, do you think she's...?"

"Don't think that, Vicky," Tom stopped her. "We'll find her. Come on!" He starts running, his friends immediately following him.

"Wait, won't we get in trouble for being outta class?" Vicky asked worriedly.

"Fuck the rules!" Tom shouted. "They don't mean SHIT if your life's in danger!"

Tom and his friends searched through Alana's room to look for anything that could explain her disappearance, but unfortunately, they couldn't find anything.

"Think Vick, where else could Alana be?" Tom asked Vicky.

She put her hand on her chin in deep thought, and then... "Oh! She always liked to hang around in the computer lab!"

With that, they ran down the hall to look for the computer lab, Tom praying that he'd find Alana there safe and sound, in his worries he thought he saw something small and blue in the window of one of the classroom doors. For a split second he thought it was that Sonic Doll head, smiling from behind the window, but as soon as he slowed down and turned his head to see, it was gone, as if it slipped back out of view. Trying to keep it out of his mind, Tom continued running with his friends.

Eventually they found the door to the computer lab. It was empty, quiet, the lights turned off and all the computers turned on and the screens all glowing brightly in the dark room.

"Alana....?" Tom whispered as he and his friends slowly snuck into the room, searching every part of the room for any sign, *any sign* for Vicky's friend. "Alana are you in here...?"

Roger whispered, a hint of fear in his voice, "do you think that freak went and took his soul too?"

"What??" Vicky asked loudly, her head zipping to Roger.

"Ugh, fuck off with that, man," Mike said impatiently. "There *isn't* some monster going around pretending to be Sonic and stealing people souls, dammit."

"What the fuck are you guys talking about???" Vicky desperately asked.

"Mike, I'm telling you it's the only--" Tom tried to reason, but Mike wasn't having any of it.

"And I'M telling YOU, Tom! There is NO fucking monster here!"

"Ohhh yes there is."

All four of them jumped in shock upon hearing that horrifyingly familiar, mocking fake teen voice from behind them. Tom and his friends frantically whizzed their heads around to search for the source of it within the large dark computer room.

"The fuck...You all heard that right???" Mike sputtered.

"Yeah, we ALL fucking did," Roger answered.

Tom tried to muster up whatever courage he had left, trying to speak in a brave, commanding tone as his eyes shifted. "Who are you?"

The room echoed with the creature's clown-like laughter, and then the voice responded in the surreal, child's voice he heard it speak in as the doll head.

"What's wrong Tom? Don'tcha recognize meeeeeeeee?"

Tom felt his blood run cold. It knew his name.

"Q-quit playing around! We know you're not the REAL Sonic. You're just some...THING pretending to look like him!" Tom, trying to ignore his growing fear of meeting this beast.

The creature's voice turned back into the teen, a now bored tone, but still taunting, condescending.

"Pfft, killjoy..."

"It's been you this whole time, hasn't it?" Tom demanded. "You're the one that's been killing everyone and stealing their souls. You're the one that killed Kyle!"

Roger, Mike and Vicky look at their friend as he said that.

To their surprise the creature spoke in a voice that completely threw them all off; it sounded genuinely offended, emotionally hurt even.

"Wait...You think...I'm going around killing people? You think I'm a murderer???"

Tom wasn't sure how to respond to this, he was interrogating a supernatural monster about murder and here it was acting like a child that was in trouble with his parents. But then the creature's tone changed to a more annoyed, matter-of-fact one.

"Don't make me laugh. I've never murdered a single human being in my life!"

"Wha...?" Tom was confused. "What do you mean you never...?"

"Exactly what I mean, smart guy! Why would I wanna waste such a perfectly good toy?"

Tom's brow furrowed in confusion, and he was sure his friends were just as clueless as he was. Just what was going on?

"....."A perfectly good t--" What the hell are you talking about?!" Tom demanded in frustration and fear.

Tom and his friends then saw something beginning to form on the wall across from them. The space on the wall began to distort and deform, as if its very reality was being torn to shreds as something very large moved it's way out.

What stepped into the computer lab from the distortion on the wall made Tom's skin freeze up and his friends recoil.

Tall, lanky, with long thin arms and legs that appeared to be stretching into black sharp claws, an X-shaped cut across his bare chest, his dark furry quills wild, his skin grotesquely pale and his face...Eyes black with cracks over his face, two pin-prick red dots for pupils staring down at them, and an unnaturally wide smile, more fangs than there should be in his mouth...

Tom noticed that the outline to his entire body seemed odd, distorted even, like this thing wasn't even in sync with the space he was supposed to occupy.

As the creature walked closer to them, the computers that were near him started to go haywire, and Tom saw, to his surprise, that they started to shut-down due to the batteries running out of power. At that moment, Tom realized that the battery power was being siphoned by this creature's very existence.

In his left hand was a girl, struggling in the air to be free from the creature's grip. It was Alana.

The creature spoke, Tom saw his wide, drooling mouth move as he spoke in that hideously fake Sonic voice, an apparent hint of a growl lying under.

"What I'm talking about is that I haven't been killing anybody. I've no reason to! If I kill someone then that'd be one less human for me to play with, pure and simple! and I wanna play with *every* single one of you."

The creature shifted his attention to Alana, who was whimpering in fear in her desperate struggle. Vicky let out a cry as she put her hand on her own mouth.

"Take this sweet lil miss for example! She's a bit of a dork with computers. Just *imagine* the kinda fun I could get having someone like her around."

As Tom saw the creature's expression turn into a hungry, predatorial look as he looked at the terrified Alana, Tom muttered out, fear and anger rising within him, "Let her go. You leave her and my friends alone, goddammit."

The creature shot his look back at Tom and his predatory smile changed into a kind of smile as if he just got some kind of sick joke. And then he tossed his head back in laughter. The clown-like cackle angered Tom more and more as it rang across the room.

"Or you'll do what? Truth be told, You've been the most fun I've had in months, Tom! Your insecure desire to keep your friends safe, wanting to play hero and all. It's been a while since I've met such an adorably delusional human! that look on your face when you saw what I did to your friend

kyle...priceless! HA!"

"You MOTHERFUCKER...!!" Tom yelled furiously. The minute Kyle's name was mentioned, it was like something inside him snapped. He ran toward the monster against his friends' protests to strike at him, to hurt him.

Unfortunately it seemed reality struck first as Tom was sent flying back. The creature had knocked him back with his free hand, the amused look on his monstrous face stiffling another hateful laugh.

As his friends rushed over to him when he landed on the floor, Tom struggled to get back up, not taking his eyes off the monster, anger still lingering. "Why?!" Tom demanded, "*Why* are you doing this?! What did we humans ever do to you?!"

The creature looked at Tom and then answered, casually speaking as if he was completely oblivious to the fact that Alana was still struggling in his hand.

"Oh, you didn't do anything to me at all, In fact you humans are the most amazing thing I've ever come across in this boring universe. I was bored outta my mind when I first came here but then I saw your kind, and i felt like I *had* to have every single one of you, to do as I wish, to play with however I desired! Granted it's taking me a while to complete my collection of fun little humans, but--"

"That's FUCKED UP!" VIcky yelled. "The way you talk about humans is like you think we're nothing but toys!"

"Ohh but you *are.* You all exist for *my* amusement and *my* amusement alone."

The creature returned his predatory glare at the terrfied Alana, but then his smile widened as he looked at Tom and his friends one last time before saying matter-of-factly, his growl more prominent.

"Besides...It's not like *you* guys are gonna stop me."

What happened next was something that had vividly burned itself into Tom's memory to this day. Whatever horrors he was imagining before what the creature did, he could never recall.

A monstrous, snarling rattle was heard as the creature slowly began to pull his entire head back, and Tom and his friends watched as his mouth began to stretch more and more open. The fangs more exaggeratedly popping out, Alana screamed as she looked into the vast maw, and for a moment Tom thought the creature was going to eat her...

...But then the hands came out.

From within the creature's extremely wide maw, Tom saw hands immediately snake their way out. Long, black, writhing. As many shadowy hands grabbed a hold of the screaming Alana, Tom could also hear Vicky screaming in terror. A few of the hands grabbed Alana's arms, shoulders and neck, while another pair was working with her mouth. Alana shrieked and struggled to keep her mouth shut, but the hands latched onto her jaws and began to force her mouth open.

Tom's brain was jamming as he helplessly watched the hands pull her mouth open, the sound of bones snapping. Alana's body convulsed as an extra hand forced it's way down her throat, disgusting sounds of flesh tearing and squishing inside her. Tom was beyond horrified, he couldn't think...

After a few seconds, all of the hands let go of Alana, who had gone limp at this point as the arm that went down her throat began to pull itself back out. Alana's body dropped to the floor when the hand yanked out of her mouth, taking with it something unsual. Within the hand's claws was a small orb of bluish light, its glow layered and seen through Alana's blood. To Tom, the sight of this orb was surreal, otherworldly.

The hand placed the orb onto the creature's normal hand and then retreated back into his mouth with the many other fiendish arms as his maw shrank back to its "normal" wide grin, a greedy, perverted look on his face as he stared at the glowing orb in his hand.

"Holy shit...You fucking killed her!" Mike choked out, his face pale with horror.

The creature's eyes moved toward Tom and his friends, an annoyed look on his face, his voice back to that bored tone.

"Jeez, how dense *are* you, dude? I told you I don't kill humans. Your friend's still alright."

Turning to face them again, the creature grinned again as he then held his hand out, showing them the orb caught between his claws, like it was some kind of prize for him to show off, his voice that teasing child voice again.

"See? She's riiiiight here."

Realization hit Tom, and he quietly asked, "you mean that's...that's her...?"

"Her soul. Correct. Just like ALL of my other playthings, your friend is still alive and well right here. Because the soul *never* dies, like, *ever."*

The creature's claws opened up, and then the soul sank into the palm of his hand, until its blue glow disappeared. He closed his fingers again as he licked his lips, a long, purple tongue sliding against his gleaming fangs.

"And now it's all mine. To take Home with me just like the rest of ya!"

"H-Home?" Roger asked shakingly. "What's "Home"?"

"*MY* Home of course! where all the souls I've collected are at. To do whatever I want with, to mold and break as many times as I desire. An eternity of playing with me awaiting every single one of you humans!"

The creature laughed again. Tom felt terror more than he ever did as the creature took another step forward, more computers dying in his wake as he took a more predatorial stance. An excited and sadistic grin looming on his monstrous face, drool beginning to seep from his mouth as he spoke, growling rising in volume in his

voice, with each slow step he took they took a step back. He looked like he was about to lunge at them.

"Already I've started my little shopping spree with this college of yours. An entire smorgasboard of entertaining souls all to myself! What're the odds of that?? Ha! And it looks like I've found myself four lucky souls for the price of one right now!"

The creature got down on all fours in a poucing position, he licked his fangs some more, his red eyes gleaming in the dim room. His voice changed to a more beastly baritone.

"Today is a *really* good day for me."

Tom's heart pounded, he saw the door to their right. It was now or never.

"Guys....Run. NOW!!" He suddenly yelled. They all jumped out of the way as the creature leaped to grab them, crashing into the wall and snarling in pain as he missed them. Tom and his friends ran out the door and started running down the hall, hearing the creature's laughter from within the computer room.

"Nice dodge! Go on then! run run run, the fun's only just begun!"

"We gotta get anyone that's left in the school out of here, and then we gotta warn Green!" Tom shouted as they continued running.

"How?!" Mike squealed.

"The intercom in the offices! We can warn everybody there!" Roger shouted.

With that, they entered the administration offices and found the intercom mic. Tom turned it on and then, calming himself down, he spoke into it.

"Attention all students. This is not a drill. The killer is in the building right now. Please evacuate the college right now and get as far away as you can. I repeat, this

is not a drill. There is a killer inside the college right now! Please evacuate and get as far away as you can!"

After a few minutes, They heard a commotion going on outside. They had succeeded, people were starting to leave!

"Ha! we did it!" Roger exclaimed, he and Mike happily high-fiving each other.

"Phew...Suck on THAT, you psychotic freak," Tom whispered to himself as he triumphantly sat back....But then his relief began to diminish the minute he began to notice the commotion outside not dying down.

"...Why are there still people here?" Vicky asked, quietly.

Dread returning within them all, they all left the offices and headed toward one of the entrances, where a good number of students and teachers were trying to fight their way out, with zero success.

On the other side of the doors was what looked like wooden boards. Someone had barricaded them in!

"No fucking way...No fucking way!" Tom repeated in dismay. There was no way this could be real.

"Yo! THIS entrance is sealed off too!" Mike said in a shocked tone, he was checking one of the entrances nearby. "Someone fucking locked us in!"

The teachers tried to calm the students down. Then they tried to lead them to any other ways out, but Tom wasn't sure if that would mean anything at this point.

Tom tried to call Green, but the minute he pulled open his phone....No service.'

When his friends saw this, they tried to use their phones too. To their shock and horror, their phones had no service either.

"That's...That's not possible," Vicky whimpered.

"What the fuck is going on?!" Mike yelled desperately.

And then that voice again, that teasing singing child's voice. Coming somewhere from the ceiling.

"*Uhh oooohhhhh...I forgot to tell you guys...*"

Tom and his friends shot their heads up to see the Sonic doll head danging from the

ceiling, smiling down at them all as it swayed lazily like a pendulum under the black appendage it was attached to. The head spoke again without its smiling mouth moving.

"I have a few friends that like to make sure my collecting goes off without a hitch. None of you are going anywheeeeere..."

Anger rose up within Tom as he looked at the wretched doll head smiling that mocking smile down at him. "That wouldn't happen to be the Cult of X by any chance, would it?" He snapped.

"Oh! You know about the Cult already?"

The creature laughed as the head swayed more.

"Yes. They've been helping me with my little collectathon ever since they found out about my existence. Imagine that! a group of humans that actually *want* to play with me! The rest of you humans all should learn from their example. They all think of me as a *god* because of what I can do!"

"What the hell kind of crazy assholes would wanna think of THIS thing as some kind of god???" Roger asked, utterly baffled. The creature continued to speak.

"Sadly, I can only do so much in your world. For some reason, my powers are limited every time I cross over. I can't even change the reality of any of the rooms in this dull ass place...But ahh well. That's not important right now. what *is* important is me getting to snagging your souls!"

"You're not stealing anymore souls, tonight!" Tom yelled defiantly. "We're gonna find a way to contact Detective Green, and then the whole world's gonna know about

you!"

The creature only laughed as the doll head began to transform, the tiny black dotted eyes widening and crackling as red dots began to appear, his mouth opening up to show his fangs.

"Well, go on and bring him over! All the more souls for me to collect and play with!"

The doll head then split almost in half as its mouth opened up, an unearthly snarl was heard as the multitude of arms springing out once more, this time for Tom and his friends. The hands went straight for Vicky, who fell to the floor screaming and shielded herself, but Mike jumped in the way and started to wrestle with the arms that had grabbed him, preventing them from grabbing a hold of his girlfriend.

"MIKE, NO!!!" Vicky screamed in shock.

"The fuck you doing you idiot?!" Tom shouted in protest as he helped Vicky.

"Don't worry about me, dipshit!" Mike yelled back and grunted as he struggled and tried to overpower the arms that now had his attention. "Just get the fuck outta here! GO!!"

Not seeing any other option, Tom dragged the crying Vicky as he and Roger started running, hoping to find another way out as Mike continued to fight back.

By the time they had reached a classroom, Tom's heart plummeted as he heard Mike screaming far behind them before eruptly stopping. Vicky sobbed in his arms in response.

Trying to fight back tears himself, Tom looked around the classroom. Already, students had been taken as well. More screams were faintly heard all around them. The creature was taking all of their souls, one by one.

"We gotta hide somewhere," Tom muttered, trying to suppress his grief and anger.

"...The cafeteria kitchen. We'll hide in the food storage!" Roger said, breathing heavily.

As more screams were heard all around them from multiple places around campus, Tom, Roger and Vicky continued to run down the halls for the cafeteria. Vicky was lagging behind, no doubt exhausted and traumatized. After Tom and Roger through

an open set of double doors as they entered the cafeteria, the doors suddenly slammed shut and locked themselves, preventing Vicky from following them.

"What the fuck?!" Tom shouted as he turned around to see the doors shut, he rushed back and tried to open them, but to no luck. Roger joined him. "Vicky, open the door!"

"I'm trying!" Vicky wailed. She banged her fists on the door sobbing. "Let me in there!"

"How the fuck did these close on their own?!" Roger demanded as he tried to kick the doors down.

Tom froze. Through the window, he saw the creature in his lanky beastly form standing behind her as she obliviously struggled to get the door open, smiling evilly at him. The creature raised a finger and waved it, doing a 'no no no' motion before bringing it to his curled lips as if he was shushing Tom.

"Vicky...Vicky get outta there!" Tom started to say. "Get the fuck outta here Vick!!" Vicky looked at him with a confused look before turning to see the monster. She recoiled and slumped against the door, sliding down until she was on the floor as Roger and Tom were banging against the door and screaming for her to run.

"Tom! TOM HELP ME!! HELP ME!!!" Vicky screamed and sobbed, the grinning creature casually strolled toward her and smiling his fanged smile down at her, very clearly enjoying the terror he was inflicting on her. Roger was trying to break the door down while Tom was yelling desperately and banging his fists on the door.

"Leave her alone, you goddamn monster!!" Tom screamed, tears of rage were streaming down his face as the creature drew closer to her, he then stopped and moved his black and red eyes toward the angered Tom, amused by his anger and his helplessness. "Goddamn you! I swear to God I'm gonna kill you! YOU HEAR ME YOU SON OF A BITCH?! *I'LL KILL YOU!!!*"

The creature flashed an amused grin at Tom before opening his mouth wide again. An unnatural growl was heard once more in combination to Vicky's screams of terror. Tom could only scream in despair as he watched the monster sadistically lift Vicky up with the many arms that shot out of his mouth, holding her in place to pull open her own. With a choked sob Tom forced himself to shut his eyes and look away as he heard Vicky's jaws break and the grotesque sound of the creature's hand forcing it's way down her gullet to rip her soul out.

"Tom, we gotta keep going...C'mon, we gotta hide dude!" Roger spoke in a pained voice, shaking Tom's shoulder to get his attention. Opening his eyes, Tom saw the creature had vanished.

Now only Tom and Roger remained, as they ran down the cafeteria to head for the

kitchen, running past the dozen dead bodies that laid here and there on the floor and tables. It was dead silent all around. Tom was numb. He didn't speak as Roger found the steel door to the food storage and pulled it open. He and Tom walked right in and Tom sat down as Roger pulled the door shut.

"Okay...We....We should be safe here for a while," Roger panted. "We just wait until it's safe to head back out and find a way to get outta this college."

"I couldn't save them..." Tom muttered quietly as he sat.

"What?" Roger asked.

"I couldn't save them, Roger," Tom said more loudly. "Mike...Vicky...Kyle...I couldn't save anybody..." Tears formed in his eyes as he said that.

"...Dude, look." Roger sat next to him. "It's not your fault this guy is after everyone. And we can still try to stop him."

"How though?" Tom asked desperately. "The Cult of X has sealed every way out and they probably cut the wifi to the whole school too."

"Well...There's always the fire exit, which is like, somewhere on the roof?" Roger innocently answered.

Tom sat there silently and then chuckled, wiping his eyes. "At least *you're* trying to be optimistic about all this, man."

"Well as long as there's still somebody in this college, we can put an end to this somehow. He hasn't caught *us* yet, and we're not gonna let him," Roger assured.

Tom sighed as he sat back. "No, we're not. We're not gonna let him win."

"Still...I wonder what he meant by "his Home". Did he mean like the world inside the game?" Roger asked.

"I don't know. Probably," Tom answered, sounding tired. "It's pretty obvious this guy isn't of this world, and wherever he came from isn't a home *I* wanna be in."

"No kidding," Roger agreed, sitting back.

"So, what do we do now?" Tom asked.

Roger looked at him then at the door, then finally him again. "We make it to morning. If it's safe then, we'll start looking for a way out."

8

In the morning, Tom awoke from his sleep in the food storage by the sound of his phone ringing. Last night was absolute hell for him, and he was sure he and Roger were the only ones left in the college. The creature probably had taken all the souls of everyone left in campus by now.

Lifting his head, Tom's sleepiness dropped siginifcantly when he heard the ringing again. He sat back up and pulled his phone out and answered it. It was Detective Green.

"Tom? Tom are you there?" Green's voice asked, his voice sounding concerned.

"Green! Oh thank God!" Tom choked with relief.

"Thank God indeed. I've been trying to call you for ages but the wifi was down. What's going on?" Green asked.

"Green, you gotta get us out of here," Tom said urgently. "The killer's here in the college...He...He's murdered everyone. Only me and my pal Roger are left."

"Wait...Are you serious? The killer's at the college right now?" Green asked.

"Yes! And he's killed EVERYONE!! Please, you gotta get us outta here!" Tom desperately pleaded. "The Cult of X is also involved, they sealed every way out of the college and they were the ones that jammed the wifi!"

"Oh Christ..." Green muttered, sounding rather horrorstruck, then tried to maintain his composure. "All right, sit tight, Tom. I'll be on my way ASAP. Just hold on for just a little while longer, okay?"

"Yes, thank you!" Tom exclaimed, relieved that hope was not dead yet. "Please hurry, I dunno where he is or what he's doing, but I'm...I'm fucking terrified." Tom's voice started to crack as tears welled up again, indeed, Tom was feeling fear. "I just wanna go home detective, I just wanna go home and not be here. Please..."

"Okay, okay, just calm down, Tom," Green responded. "It's gonna be all right. I need you to be strong right now, okay? We're going to get you out of there. But please remain strong for just a little while longer until I arrive okay?"

Tom calmed down as he was told and responded. "...Okay. Okay I will. Thank you, Detective."

With that they both hang up. Tom stood back up. "Roger?" He said. "Roger where

are you? Detective Green was on the phone! He's on his way right now, we're getting out of here! Roge--" His excited voice faltered when he saw the steel door out of the food storage had become ajar....Was it always open...?

"Uhhhh Roger?" Tom asked, confused. "The door's open..." His voice trailed when he turned to see Roger's legs sticking out from behind a stack of boxed foods one side of the room.

"Roger?" Tom called out again, walking toward the stack as a familiar dread began to creep back into him.

When he turned around to look the other side of the stack, he felt his legs go numb and his heart break. He fell onto his knees, numb beyond belief. There sitting on the floor before him was Roger. Lifeless, pale, eyes blank and his mouth ripped open, blood oozing from his jaw as it hung uselessly from his face.

Tom let out a long drawn out scream of pain, sorrow and agony, not taking off his tear-filled eyes off what had remained of his final friend, an empty, shell of a corpse. Robbed of his sense of self, robbed of his soul.

Tom crumbled to the floor and slammed his fist repeatedly on the ground, screaming in despair and so much hatred for the one who had cruelly taken away all of Tom's friends; the horrible, otherworlding monstrosity that so selfishly viewed humanity as nothing more than property to be owned, toys to be endlessly played with until they broke. Never had Tom felt so much anger or hatred for another living being, and he had lost all rational thought in his despair as he immediately ran out of the storage and out of the cafeteria.

He didn't care if the creature was still out and about or not, he didn't care if he himself was out in the open to be caught like everyone else. He had enough. He ran and he ran until he reached his own dorm room.

He breathed maniacally looking at his laptop that sat on his desk, he looked at it with such a mad, hateful look in his eyes as if he knew just what to do to end this. As if he had been meaning to do it from the very beginning.

In a maniacal rage Tom grabbed his laptop and slammed it on the floor, then slammed it again. Kicking it, he then grabbed a hammer and started smashing the screen and bottom half of the laptop. He screamed, laughed and cried as he continued destroying his own laptop, hysterically pretending he was actually hurting the monster that was hiding inside it. Then, with one final swing, the black, fully damaged screen shattered.

It was done. He had done it. The bridge between worlds had been demolished. If the creature was already back in his world, there was no way he was gonna cross back over now, and if he was out in this one, he was trapped, unable to return to the nightmare realm that was his "home".

Tom laid there on the floor, letting out a sob. He sobbed and sobbed for what seemed like hours. He felt like he was finally free from a horrible horrible nightmare. Finally, the monster was gone.

He wasn't able to save his friends, but now Tom could rest, for he had saved everyone.

Then he heard something.

"Battery Power at 100%"

Tom sat back up, and slowly turned, to see Kyle's laptop. It had fully charged.

He immediately felt the urge to destroy it too, but before he could even raise the hammer to slam it down on the laptop, something stopped him.

It was a voice. A familiar voice...

"...Tom? Tom are you there?"

No...It couldn't be...

Tom dropped the hammer in shock and slowly he opened up the laptop.

On his screen staring back at him was Knuckles the Echidna, except his red fur was a dim, almost rust kind of color, his purple eye color was instead green, and he had a dismal look on his face that looked like he found relief in years. The environment he seemed to be in was Green Hill Zone.

Tom looked at the Knuckles that stared back at him. The Knuckles then weakly spoke up in that unbelievably familiar voice.

"H-hey T-Tom...What's up..?"

Tom didn't want to say it, but he knew exactly who it was he was talking to, and as he felt tears return to him he slowly whispered the name.

"Kyle...?"

The pitiful creature nodded, also trying to keep himself from crying as well.

"Oh...Oh god..." Tom muttered in disbelief. "What did he do to you...?"

"Heh..." The creature that was Kyle chuckled wryly. "I guess I really am as reckless as you say I am, bro..." Tom couldn't say anything, he just looked at his childhood friend.

"I'm so sorry dude...This is all my fault." Kyle stated miserably, closing his eyes and shaking his head in guilt. "I should have never have gotten this godforsaken game in the first place. I fucked up real bad dude...I fucked up *real* bad..."

"Don't," Tom tried to calm him down. "You didn't know. There was no way you coulda known."

"I wanted to tell you, believe me, I WANTED to." Kyle desperately explained. "But...That *thing*...he fucking got to me before I could even do anything."

"I had a feeling," Tom stated. "He's already gotten Roger, Mike and Vicky....He's gotten everyone here in the college. I'm all that's left here."

"Wait...Seriously?" Kyle asked worriedly. "Shit...No fucking wonder he's been in a good mood..."

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

"He wants me to convince you to give up your soul so you can join the rest of us in this world," Kyle admitted.

"What...?" Tom asked, shocked.

"Yeah. But I'm not going to. It's bad enough he's gotten me and everyone else, but I'm not gonna let him get you," Kyle spoke up, his courage rising. "Tom, you need to get out of that college!"

"But--" Before Tom could say anything else, the screen glitched and changed, Kyle was gone as the screen became undescribable.

"NO!" Tom yelled, clutching the sides of the monitor. "Give him back! GIVE HIM BACK DAMMIT!!"

The glitching subsided and then Tom froze, he was now looking into what looked like a dark hallway. The walls were purple, lined with torches, above was rows of dark red curtains that were slowly swaying, and the floor was checkered, the hallways looked as if it was fading into darkness.

A piano started to play as Tom looked at the hallway. It was an odd sort of melody, faint, distant, he couldn't tell if it was supposed to be somber or melancholic. As it continued to play, two red dots appeared in the darkness of the hallway and Tom froze. He watched in horror as the false Sonic creature that had been tormenting him these past weeks walked into view, smiling that wide, sharp-fanged smile as he came closer, closer still.

Tom stumbled onto the floor and crawled back and watched as the creature walked closer to the screen until his head was all that was visible. And then he raised a hand, and then the screen began to distort and deform, reality being torn and

twisted as the creature began to climb his way out.

The creature crawled on all fours as he crawled out of Kyle's laptop, never taking his hungry, predatorial eyes off his latest prey. The creature then got up to his feet and towered over Tom, before bending over a bit and spoke in a hushed voice that was a combination of his beastly growl and his mocking fake teenager voice.

"Time for Round 2, Tom."

With fiendish delight, the creature took a step forward, causing Tom to shuffle back in panic. The sadistic beast giggled that hideous clown-like laugh as he gleefully continued slowly walking towards Tom, talking over him as he was indulging every second of the fear he was instilling upon the young man.

"You're the last one here, Tom, and you've been the *most* fun I've had in ages."

Tom helplessly crawled until he felt his back press against his bookcase. He saw the creature's fangs glistening with his drool as he came closer toward him and was itching to grab Tom with his hand. The creature's eyes rolled back as he huffed and snarled pervertedly.

"ohhhh all the fun and games you and I will enjoy once I bring you home with me..."

"No...No please..." Tom whimpered and begged, tears streaming down his face, the creature growled and stared lustfully down at him, his fanged smile more maniacal than ever imagined. Tom saw the knife-holder in the kitchen behind the monster...He had to be quick...

"...I daresay you might even end up becoming one of my *favorites!"*

And then, as soon as the creature lunged in to grab Tom, he dodged out of the way and then pulled the bookcase over the monster, causing it and all it's contents to topple on top of him. The creature snarled and yelped as he got partially buried in books and trophies while Tom made a mad dash into his kitchen.

The minute the creature pushed the fallen bookcase off himself and pulled himself out of the mess, he turned after Tom but stopped when he saw Tom pull out the largest knife out of the knife-holder and pointed it at him.

There was a very tense silence. Tom was aiming his knife at the monster like a weapon, while the monster looked at the knife in confusion.

"Stay the fuck back..." Tom threatened quietly. "I'm warning you...Stay fucking back."

The creature looked at the knife and then at Tom, before throwing his head back laughing his mad clown-like laugh, barely standing upright as he did so, as if this was the most funniest thing he had ever seen.

"Is that *really* the best you can do, kid?!"

Tom felt extremely awkward as the creature said this. Truthfully, he didn't really think any of this through.

"Get real, Tom. I'm not a part of this world. How do you even know if that thing's really capable of killing something like myself? Are you really willing to take that kinda risk?"

Tom's knife hand shook slightly. He was really in a tight spot now. He wasn't sure if this knife was enough to hurt this creature, let alone kill him, and it's not like he could just run out the door and find a way out, the creature would surely catch him....and Green hadn't arrived yet.

Trying to think of his options while keeping his posture and gaze on the monster, not showing him any weakness, Tom suddenly paused.

Perhaps there was but *one* way to escape this, if it meant sparing himself from the same fate as all those this creature had taken away...

"No...No I'm not willing to take that risk. But I AM willing to take something else,"

Tom quietly told him, his voice shaking,

The creature's brow furrowed, his smile fading as he had a look of suspicion.

"What're you doing...Wait."

Tom immediately brought the knife towards his own neck.

"NO! DON'T!"

For the first time, he heard it. He heard fear in the creature's voice as he roared at him, his hand outstretched, a look of genuine panic on the creature's face.

"Got your attention now, did I? Good!" Tom continued, keeping the knife at his own throat. "You're not getting *me*, goddammit. You may have gotten everyone else, all my friends, but not me. Either you let me go now, or I'm gonna become the one toy you can *never* fucking have!"

The creature's face contorted into that of rage, his voice much less that of a teen and more like that of a monster.

"...That's not fair. THat's not fair dammit, you were supposed to Let me *WIN!!"*

Tom watched as the creature childishly flailed and snarled angrily, smashing and knocking down several furniture in his tirade.

"You cheated! That's not fair! You're a rotten little cheater, Tom!"

"And you're pathetic!" Tom yelled, "You're not some all-powerful being that owns mankind, you're just a psychotic, spoiled little brat and a bully!"

The creature growled as he paced the room glaring at Tom.

"You took all my friends..." Tom's voice quivered with spite. "You torment and make people miserable for the fun of it. It's high time someone got a rise out of *you* for once, you sick freak."

The creature stopped, and then slowly looked at him with a sly grin, that teen voice once again regained.

"Your friends, eh? You care a great deal about them, huh?"

Tom blinked, he was surprised by this change in behavior, steeling himself for anything the creature might pull, he nodded.

"Well, how do you think *they* would feel about you wanting to take your own life right now?"

The creature casually paced around the room, continuing his speech as Tom watched him.

"I mean think about it, Tom. You were supposed to be the hero of this story for them, weren't you? You wanted to save them. Doesn't it seem a *little* selfish to want to take your own life instead of being alive like them?"

The creature's words struck a small blow to Tom. It's true, he wanted to save his friends, but...

"Why, I'd even go so far as say that's unbelievably cowardly of you, Tom! Your friends are all still living in *my* world, hoping that you'll come to save them, and yet here you are, choosing to abandon them, choosing *death* over seeing them again."

Tom struggled to keep the knife at his throat, he didn't want to admit it, but the creature was right. He was outright abandoning his friends by choosing death. Guilt

washed over Tom as he began to realize how selfish he was, he brought his knife hand down as he stood there. The creature's red eyes gleamed maliciously as he watched Tom, he continued.

"Personally, *I* see no reason why you should choose death. When you're dead, you can no longer be with those you care about, you can't see those you love anymore. I mean, why do you think I'm collecting every human being on this earth?"

Tom looked up at the creature, unable to provide an answer, instead the creature continued to explain.

"Because the soul can't die. They continue going on even once they leave the body. This is what I do: I take the soul, I mold it into an appropriate shape, and then boom! You're now an immortal resident of my lovely home! Think about it, Tom. By entering *my* world, you're given the opportunity to never experience death. you can spend eternity with your friends...and only *I* can make that happen for you."

The creature held out a hand to Tom, as if giving him an offer. The creature's smile seemed less vicious and more friendly, his teen voice overlapping the growl.

"I'm not asking much, really. All I ask is that you keep me entertained every now and then. It's only fair that way, right? You play whatever game I want with me, and you and your friends get to live and thrive in my beautiful world for eternity. You'll even get to go around being the character you love most! Doesn't sound like a bad dea, does it?"

Tom stood there, taking in the creature's words carefully. The offer *did* sound tempting...

But Tom Miller knew, from the moment he first saw this creature that it wasn't some hero or savior, he wasn't Sonic at all. It was just some monster pretending to be him.

Tom took a deep inhale and looked at the monster, an air of confidence rising within himself as he saw the creature's smile dropping, as if he was beginning to know he wasn't getting through to him.

"Sorry, dude. A nice offer, but an eternity playing with *you?* I realize now, you're not a spoiled brat...You're out of your goddamn mind!" Tom yelled with courage burning within him.

The creature's mouth twisted into an angry snarl as he raised his hand to strike at Tom, but immediately froze, his black eyes wide and his red pupils shrunk, as Tom immediately redirected the knife back towards his own throat.

Tom then asked. "You like going around as Sonic huh?"

"Don't..."

"Like pretending to be him, don't you?!"

"Don't you dare!"

"***WELL, LET'S SEE IF YOU'RE AS FAST AS HIM!!"***

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

As soon as the creature roared and lunged forward to stop him, Thomas Miller summoned all his courage and plunged the knife into his own throat.

9

Detective Green and his squad had arrived to the college, and broke down the barricades that sealed the entrance into it. What he and his team found was a horrific sight.

Bodies, both teachers and students, found here and there in the quiet campus. All of them dead, their mouths ripped open. Green had rushed down the hall with several cops to look for Tom, with Green hoping the boy was still alive, and they entered Tom's dorm room.

There, Derek Green stood in shock as he found Thomas Miller, sitting on a chair.

Dead.

The autopsy reported that the knife halfway stabbed into Tom's throat was brought on by himself. Suicide. However, the wound done to his face, his jaws pulled open to the point of ripping, the report could not say. Green could only assume that it was done by the same killer that killed everyone else in the college. As with the other reports, Tom's body was said to have lost 21 grams of weight.

Forensics also found Tom's laptop completely destroyed, as if someone had taken a hammer to it. Surpsisingly, the CD disc that was discovered inside the drive had remained intact, which Green had taken in as evidence.

Kyle Scott's laptop had also become unusable as well, it's battery completely burnt out, and the screen had cracked so much that it wouldn't matter if one could turn it back on.

The incident was eventually made public. A few days later, Green was sitting alone in a bar. He felt guilty about letting all those students down, Tom especially. He drank his scotch as he remembered how terrified Tom was when he spoke to him on the phone for the last time. As he sat there trying to drown his guilt, Derek's sister Sarah sat with him.

"I figured I'd find you here," she said.

Derek grunted with a shrug. "Surprisingly, I haven't handed in my badge yet."

"Look, I know you've had it rough, but you can't keep dwelling on the past. Tom wouldn't want that," Sarah tried to explain to him.

"Even so," Derek mumbled as he miserably looked at his glass of scotch, "our only lead's dead now. The killer's still out there, we have no evidence on the Cult of X being associated with the murders, and I might as well throw in the towel...We're right back at a dead end, sis."

"Well...Not exactly," she reasoned. "The forensics had reported they found something within Thomas Miller's trash when searching for evidence."

"Oh yeah? What?" Derek asked, looking at her with a raised eyebrow. With that she handed him a plastic evidence bag, in it was a letter, a crumbled up letter in jittery writing. It was the letter given to Tom by Kyle.

Sarah then said rather cooly, "seems our Cult of X was quick to give the game they gave Kyle to Tom once he was done playing with it."

Derek's eyes widen as he looked at the letter then at her. "How many times have I said I loved having you as a sister, Sarah?"

Sarah shrugged and responded rather slyly, "I'd say not enough times."

With that, Derek grabbed the letter and then they they headed straight back to the office to look into it.

Little did they know that a man, wearing all black wearing a fedora on his head, was watching them from a nearby table. He brought a hand up to his handlebar mustache as he watched the two detectives leave before dropping it and pulling out a cellphone to make a call.

When it picked up he spoke into it in a Southern baritone. "Hello? It's me. ...Yes. They got the letter. Right on schedule. Yes....Yes, I'll talk to him about it. No, ma'am. I doubt he'll disobey. The Cult of X will see to it he stays within our Lord's graces."

The man got up and started walking out the door. Before he hung the phone up, he then said.

"Yes, ma'am. I won't disappoint you. I am a soldier enforcing our Lord X's desires. I am always at his disposal...Thank you. Goodbye...Miss Goldman."

END OF CHAPTER ONE